

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku





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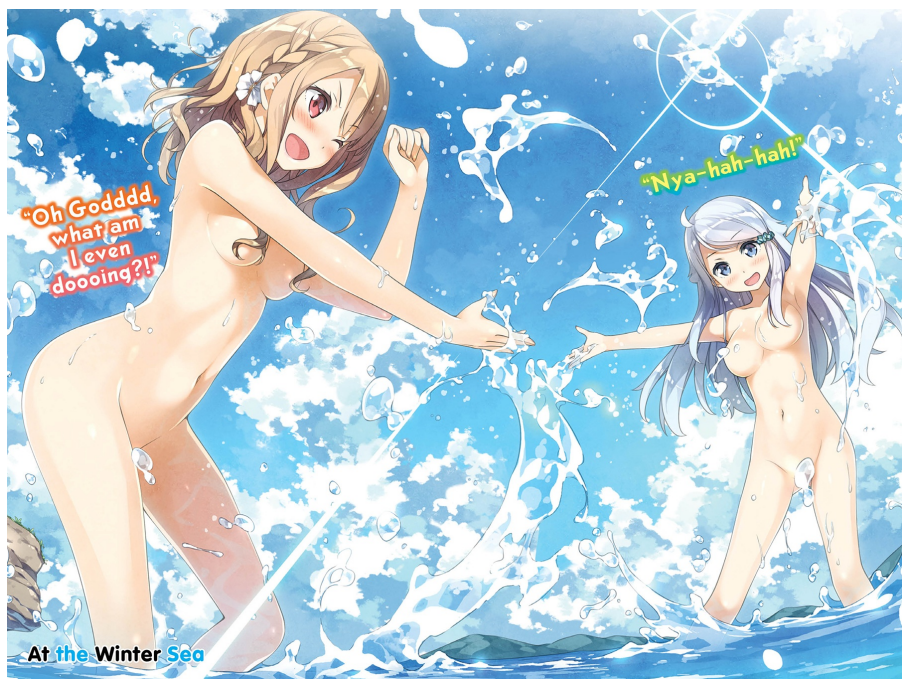
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"Crab
and
pork,
huh...?
Hmm..."

★ The Novelist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed F███k

★ Genius and Perversion

★ College Girls and Their Assorted Types

★ The Occasional Guy Friend

★ The Main Theme

★ Turtle Soup

★ Baring All

★ Gods

★ North-Meets-South Spring Rolls

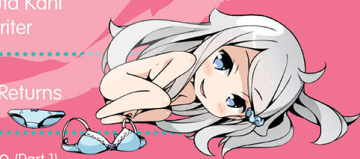
★ Valentine's Day

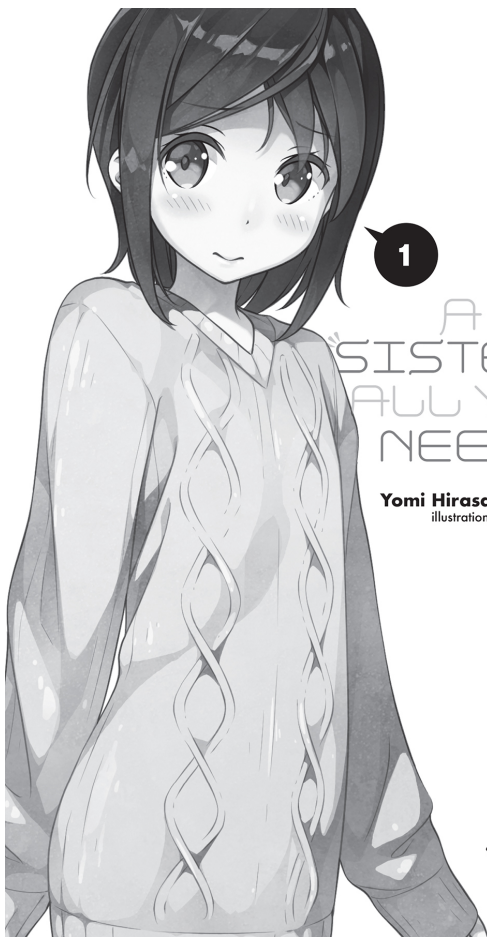
★ Valentine's Day EX (feat. Haruto Fuwa and His Hard-to-Read Sister)

★ Concerning Nayuta Kani as a Literary Writer

★ Die in a Fire, Tax Returns

★ Chronica Chronicle (Part 1)





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ALL YOU
NEED.

Yomi Hirasaka
illustration by Kantoku

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A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 1

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 1

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

A novelist seeking to devise the ultimate in little-sister characters.

CHIIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

A novelist prodigy 100 percent driven by her love for Itsuki.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

Ashley Ono

A tax accountant.

The Novelist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed F██k

“C’mon, Bro, time to get up, up, uuuup...”

As I opened my eyes to the voice, I was greeted by the sight of Alice, completely naked.

Alice is my little sister. She just turned fourteen years old this year, and her flowing blond hair and ruby-like crimson eyes leave an unforgettable impression. She’s a beautiful girl; nobody could possibly lodge any complaint against her.

“Mngh, morning, Alice,” I stammered, still in a daze. She giggled in response.

“Boy, Big Bro, you sure look sleepy-weepy this morning! And I got just the thing for a sleepyhead brother like you...”

She quickly thrust her face right up to mine...and gave it a smooch.

“...!”

Alice’s soft lips pushed close against my own, banishing any lingering drowsiness I could possibly have had. “Feeling more chipper now?” She withdrew her lips, flashing me a sly grin. Her cheeks were a little reddened. “Today Alice has a super-dee-duper-special breakfast for you! C’mon down before it gets cold!”

“Oh! All right,” I replied. She nodded at me, looking all satisfied in her birthday suit, and left the room. Her butt, soft and supple as a freshly peeled shrimp, jiggled this way and that as she sauntered off.

I had kicked off hundreds of mornings like this before, but it never got old to me. Reflecting upon the pure joy it brought me, I zoomed out of bed, eager to tuck into my sister’s latest culinary masterpiece. On the way, I washed my face with the hot water left over from my sister’s morning bath and wiped it clean with her still-warm brassiere before heading for the dining room table. Yoshiko was there, which was a surprise, considering I thought she had died yesterday.

“Okay, Big Bro,” the achingly nude Alice belted out with a heart-melting smile, “get it while the getting’s hot!”

“Thanks!”

Her fried-rice omelet was, as always, a masterpiece. The milk she

served with it overturned all previous notions I'd had about what milk could taste like. The eggs she laid for me and her fresh-squeezed milk couldn't have complemented each other better.

"Ooh, Big Bro, you got a big dollop of ketchup on ya! Ooh, *mee-owwww*, what will I ever do with you? Um, something to wipe with, something to wipe with..."

Defly conjuring a transdimensional gate to a parallel universe, Alice took out a warm, fuzzy pair of panties and dabbed at one corner of my mouth with it. The intoxicating fragrance of the Alice from the alternate dimension wafted into my nostrils, exciting them and whetting my appetite even further. Sure wish I could eat these panties. Nom, nom, nom... Oops! Now I've bitten into them. Munch, munch, nom, nom... Man, what a culinary delight.

Before long, I had scarfed down the entire undergarment. Alice responded with a bashful pout. "Ooh, Big Brotherrrr... If you wanted to eat my purty li'l panties, I woulda whipped up a piping-hot new pair—along with more of my *farrrrm*-fresh milk, of course! Tee-hee! ♥"

"You got it, Sis! I can't wait to take a whiff of your fresh-baked, fresh-stripped, fresh-tasting lacy stuff!"

"What in the *hell* is this?!"

"Whoa! Wha...what's up?"

Itsuki straightened up as Toki slammed his manuscript against the table and shouted at him.

"What do you *think* is up? ...Th-this world of yours is sheer insanity... I thought I was going into the loony bin for a second there!" Toki said, glaring as he attempted to catch his breath.

Itsuki crossed his arms and flashed a world-beating smile. "Heh... Guess my expertly woven world's found another captive, huh?"

"You...are such a psycho..." Toki replied, face tense.

Itsuki—to be exact, Itsuki Hashima—was a novelist, twenty years old, and a little small and wiry for his age. His eyes were sharp and villainous looking, but there was still a trace of youthful innocence to his face—even as he stared brazenly at Toki, clearly attempting to annoy him. Itsuki Hashima was his real name; he didn't opt for a nom de plume like many fellow writers in his genre.

Kenjiro Toki, meanwhile, was Itsuki's editor and a rather intense-looking man, twenty-six years old, in glasses and a business suit. He and Itsuki were in the midst of an editorial meeting. They kept in contact via text and phone conversations, but as much as possible, Itsuki preferred to see Toki in person and have him read hard copies of his progress. It let him better gauge his editor's unfiltered responses to the work, he thought.

Today they were in Itsuki's apartment—not an unusual meeting

place for them, since it was only about a five-minute walk from Toki's office.

"...So just to make sure we're on the same page here," Toki ventured, his voice weakened from fatigue, "this is your submission for chapter two of what we're calling *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* for now?"

"Of course." Itsuki briskly nodded. It only made Toki wince harder.

"...Well, that's weird, isn't it? Because according to the plot outline, chapter two's supposed to start with the hero being surprised by the sight of the heroine at breakfast, even though she died defending him from a demon attack at the end of chapter...one...?"

"Yep. And I'm following that outline perfectly. A little *too* perfectly, if you ask me."

Toki was referring to a handwritten flowchart of the general plot that the two of them had hammered out beforehand.

"Following that outline how, exactly?"

Itsuki winced a little himself as Toki banged a hand roughly against the table. "What? The hero's acting surprised, isn't he? That girl died in front of him yesterday, and now she's right... Um, what was her name?"

"You can't forget the main heroine's name! It's Yoshiko, all right? Yoshiko! And that's a pretty generic name, too, don't you think? Is that really a good name for a woman fighting alone, uncelebrated, in the dark realms against hordes of demons? ...I mean, all right, you *did* cram her in there and make the hero shocked to see her. I almost skipped that line entirely, but..."

"Wow, some editor you are," Itsuki said, letting out a light sigh. "I mean, don't you hate it when you write something plain as day into the story and people forget about it or skip right over it, and then they bitch at you about how there's no foreshadowing or the story's all over the place?"

"Don't make *me* the bad guy here!" Toki fired back, voice raised, before taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Sticking Yoshiko's return in there like an afterthought is one thing, but that's not even the main issue."

"What is?"

Toki rapped at the printout with his middle finger and replied, "The main issue is, who's this new Alice girl? I don't remember hearing anything about her!"

"She's the hero's sister. I wrote it down in the character descriptions, didn't I? That he had a little sister."

"Yeah, and that's all you wrote in there! You didn't go into any more detail, so I thought she was just a secondary character. No major

exposition needed...and then you give me this monster...!"

"A monstrous beauty, right? Ha-ha-ha! I'll say!"

"No, you dumbass! For the love of...! I mean, it's creepy enough you have her naked by default, but then there's all this other crap going on, and I can't even *begin* to explain what's the most screwed up about it! You have the hero sniffing bras, literally *eating* panties... What kind of deranged f██k is this guy? Are you sure you didn't mean, like, 'pancakes' instead of 'panties,' or..."

"Well, that's a silly question. Do you really think I'd make such an amateur mistake?"

"Goddammit, of course you wouldn't... And what's all this stuff about Alice's 'milk' or whatever?"

"What? It's just like I wrote. It's milk from Alice's breasts. Really rich."

"And those eggs...?"

"Yeah, she lays them. It's, like, a thousand times better than caviar, not that I like caviar all that much."

"Ha-ha-ha... Both of them are absolute maniacs! And you're the biggest maniac of all for dreaming up this BS! And I thought the hero was meant to be this average high school student from a cookie-cutter modern family! With this f██k show, readers are gonna forget all about the *Blood of the Demon Hunters*, along with anything else!"

The extended dressing-down made Itsuki frown a bit. "Hmm... Well, if you put it that way, maybe the whole milk-and-eggs thing was going *just a little bit* too far... I figured, you know, with all these supernatural fight scenes, I could get away with *just a teensy* break from reality..."

"Just a little bit...? Seriously...?" Toki shuddered.

"You see it all the time in books like this. Like, the hero's parents are actually famous adventurers, or they're secretly the hidden successors of some ancient martial art that the hero's got a talent for, too."

"Okay, so you're telling me that these psychopaths laying eggs and chowing down on panties are the same thing as the basic backstory of every fighting-hero manga ever?"

Toki's head was visibly throbbing at the temples.

"...All right," Itsuki timidly ventured, "but if you've got a younger sister and she takes a bath first, then sure, it's totally normal to wash your face with the hot water she leaves in there, right?"

"You call *that* normal, you sister-obsessed f██k ?!"

Toki screamed at the top of his lungs.



Itsuki Hashima had made his debut after winning a prize for new authors at the age of sixteen. In the ensuing three or so years, he had published a total of twenty novels—five one-shots and three multivolume series.

Even with what he had already written before going pro, twenty releases in three years was a dizzying pace—and with the level of quality he still managed at that speed, he had built up a fairly decent reader fan base. Several titles had made it onto the top-ten paperback bestseller lists released by Oricon, the most well-known sales charts in Japan. You could, in other words, say he was kind of a rising star.

When it came to writing speed, imagination, and ability to formulate a compelling story and engaging characters, Itsuki Hashima had what it took to grow and mature as a popular novelist going forward—but despite that, all his recent works had sold at a decidedly “eh” level.

One trait common to all his stories was that the main heroine was framed as a “younger sister” type.

It was a common trope among novels like these, and one that was easy to turn into a popular character, but his dogged adherence to that mold for heroines certainly made some readers roll their eyes and go, “Not again...” And given how Itsuki himself constantly strove to differentiate his little sisters from those in other novels, these characters were trending slightly further along the “extreme” scale with each new volume. As of late, even his male leads were talking about their sisters in ways that can be described only as demented, no doubt turning off quite a few readers along the way.

Figuring Itsuki would need to step away from this trope for a bit if he wanted to experience a second big break, Toki had half forced him into devising *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (final title TBD). He discovered that in doing so, Itsuki had instead created an entirely new breed of sisterly monster. “Ugh... The guy’s just crazy for little sisters...” Toki was on his way back to the office from Itsuki’s place. He heaved a weighty sigh, releasing a cloud of visible breath in the crisp January air.

“Oh! Hello, Mr. Toki!”

He was cheerfully greeted by a small young man in a windbreaker with a plastic bag from the grocery store hanging from one hand.

“Ooh, hey there, Chihiro,” Toki replied. “I was just coming back from discussing story ideas with your brother.”

“Were you? Well, thanks for being such a help to him.”

“Oh, not at all. He’s helping me, really.”

This was Chihiro Hashima, Itsuki's younger brother. He was in his first year of high school, and between his neck-length black hair and fair-skinned, indifferent-looking face, he had a sort of dashing charm to him. Itsuki described him as the perfect kid—head of the class, a star on the sports field, the whole bit. The Hashima family home was around twenty minutes by bus from Itsuki's current apartment, and Chihiro made the trip frequently to cook for him, tidy his space, and so forth. That made him an acquaintance of Toki's as well.

"Here to make dinner for him again?"

"That's right, sir."

"...Man, he's lucky to have a brother like you. I'm almost jealous."

"Oh, no, really..." Chihiro blushed a bit at Toki's heartfelt compliment. "I should get going, though. Let me know if you need anything from him."

With a polite bow, he walked off. Toki watched him go, reflecting on what a kind, gentle, gallant kid he was. A good cook, and he kept an ever-watchful eye on his big bro. Perfect.

"...Too bad Chihiro wasn't born a girl, I guess. Then maybe Itsuki wouldn't be a f██k with all these little-sister fetishes... Oh, but then he probably never would've become a novelist in the first place... Hard to say, I guess..."





Several minutes after Toki took his leave, Itsuki heard the doorbell ring. He opened the door, as he had been expecting Chihiro around this time.

“...Hey.”

“Yo.”

“...Mm.”

With this exchange of grunts, Itsuki let Chihiro in. Despite the fact that they were relatives, there was an odd, ever-present awkwardness in their interactions. They had become stepbrothers three years ago, when Itsuki's father married Chihiro's mother—right when Itsuki made his professional debut, in other words. The older son had been in his second year of high school, the younger in his first year of middle school—a time of great emotional change for both. Suddenly becoming brothers left them unprepared, unable to figure out how to deal with each other, and at first they acted more like roommates sharing the place than anything else.

Things began to change only when Itsuki went to college and moved into his own apartment. He could've stayed with the rest of the family and commuted from there easily enough, but he rented this place anyway, with his own money, claiming that he could use the time saved to work on his writing. He had wound up dropping out of university during his freshman year, but being near his editor worked so well for him that he decided to keep living there.

During Itsuki's aborted attempt at college, Chihiro would stop by sometimes with rice and other basic supplies. That was now happening more frequently, with Itsuki's brother handling basic cooking and cleaning duties as well. Becoming a full-time writer had further accelerated Itsuki's already lightning-fast pace, but it had also further deteriorated his already poor grasp of living skills. His eating and sleeping patterns grew more and more irregular over time, and it was showing in the grime covering his apartment. After a certain point, Chihiro couldn't bear to look at it any longer.

“I'll cook this up real quick.”

“...Sure.”

Now Chihiro, wearing an apron, was lining up his ingredients and cooking utensils with obvious familiarity. Itsuki gave him a side-glance or two as he typed away on his laptop, working on his novel. Half an hour later, they were on opposite sides of a table.

“Thanks.”

“No prob.”

He had prepared shrimp in chili sauce, some Chinese-style stir-fry, and fried rice—all made from scratch, nothing Itsuki could ever make, and all bursting with enough flavor to keep his chopsticks busy. Chihiro, flashing a slight smile as he watched his brother feast on it all, minded his manners as he ate at a more measured pace. Even at the dinner table, he was the perfect picture of refinement. Sophisticated, attractive, head of the class, phys-ed phenom, master chef, master homemaker, chill personality, well mannered—some kind of perfect über-bro, really. As his older brother—or as another man, really—Itsuki couldn't help but foster an inferiority complex. It had a tendency to make him take a dig at Chihiro sometimes.

“...Hey, uh, Chihiro? I really appreciate you coming here all the time, but don't you, um, have anything better to do? Like... I dunno, take your girl out on a date or something?”

Chihiro soured a bit. “I don't have a girl.”

“Oh, no?”

“No.”

A matter of personal choice, no doubt. No way *Chihiro*, of all people, wouldn't attract attention from the opposite sex.

“Why don't you go find one?”

“...I dunno. Don't really want one, I guess,” he said moping. “Plus, y'know... I'm worried about you.”

“Aw, geez, Chihiro, you don't have to worry about me!”

Chihiro let out a soft sigh. “...Well, maybe I wouldn't if you could get your act together a little?”

“Hey, I can! Like, if I wanted to.”

“Really? So you can make three meals a day by yourself? Like, *real* food, with vegetables and stuff, and not just instant ramen? Will you clean and bathe yourself and keep the recycling organized? Could you put your porn games back on the shelf by yourself?”

“S-sure I can...”

“No, you can't,” Chihiro immediately replied. “Look, Bro, you washed one of your knit sweaters with the rest of the laundry again, didn't you? That's what you always do. You just toss all your crap in there, pour in whatever amount of detergent looks right to you, then pick a random setting and start it up.”

Itsuki scowled at this completely accurate description of himself.

“There's settings...? Um...b-but you got one thing wrong there, Chihiro!”

“Oh?”

“I didn't put any detergent in at all! I ran out, and I never bothered to buy some more!”

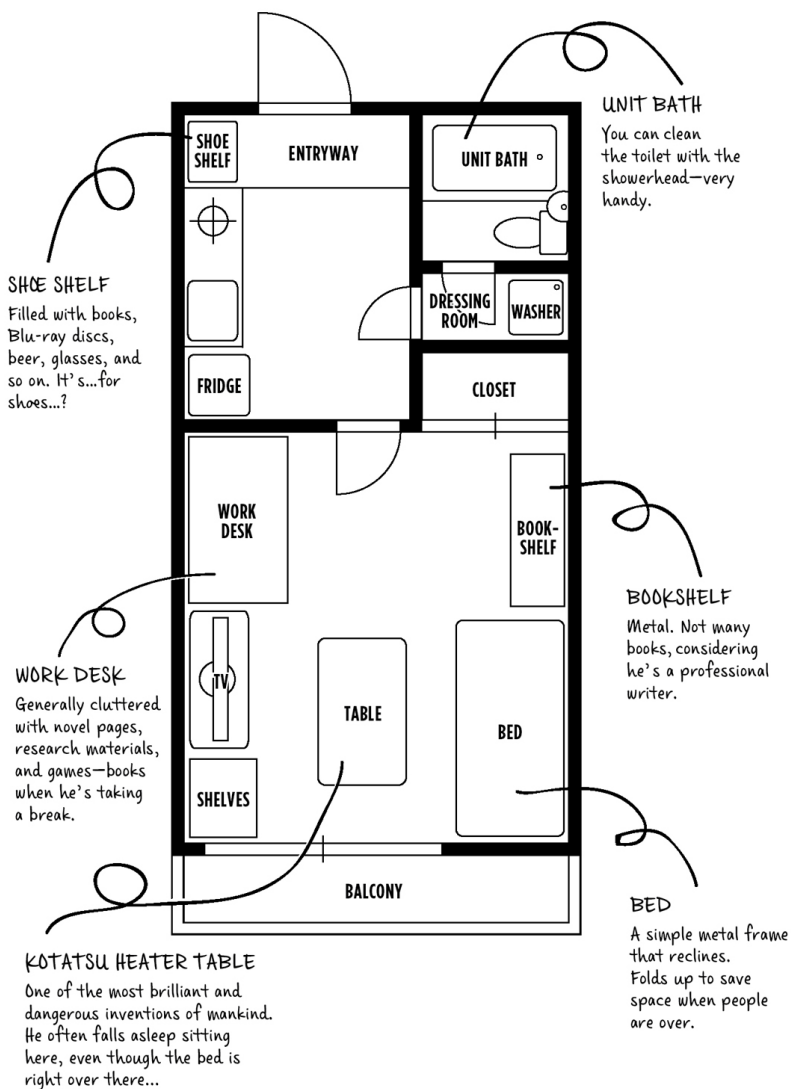
“Woow, what an achievement. And don't you have another jug

under the sink in there?”

“...Oh, I do?”

“Ugh...” Another sigh. “You’d be pretty doomed without me, wouldn’t you?” he observed, sounding ever-so-slightly pleased.

【Itsuki's Apartment】



Genius and Perversion

Itsuki Hashima's apartment was on the second floor of a three-story building built ten years ago, your standard concrete-slab job with a kitchen, a bathroom, a single living area, wood-laminate flooring, and a washing machine. It was packed to the gills with a work desk, a foldable bed, a TV, a rather large *kotatsu* table, and a multipurpose metal bookshelf packed with books, CDs, video games, DVDs, board games, and figures, all organized with tender care.

The sheer volume of stuff made the place feel cramped, but for a man living alone, it was fairly clean and free of clutter. That was 100 percent thanks to the tenant's brother, of course.

Being just a five-minute walk from the publisher of his novels (as well as ten minutes from the nearest train station) made this residence a popular hangout for the other authors who worked for the company. When he first moved in, Itsuki purchased a much larger *kotatsu* than he needed, and while he regretted it at first, figuring it'd be in the way, it was perfect for entertaining guests.

The writer visiting Itsuki's apartment was using it right now, in fact, snuggling in to enjoy the heat it provided.

Nayuta Kani was silently reading a novel, face totally bereft of emotion. She was eighteen years old and beautiful, with silver hair and blue eyes that made her look like a sprite from a fantasy realm, and despite her diminutive height, her chest was fairly well endowed.

Nayuta Kani was her pen name. Not even Itsuki knew her real one. She'd made her debut a year ago, after placing in the same contest Itsuki had once won, making him a kind of mentor to her. Her first published title was *The Silvery Landscape*, an instant hit, and her popularity (and sales) rose with every new entry in the *Landscape* series. It consisted of four books by this point, and already they had sold well above everything Itsuki had in print put together. Taking your "mentor" and leaving him in the proverbial dust happened all the time in this business.



Nayuta and Itsuki first met at the awards party for the new-author contest, not long before she made her published debut. He had been talking with a few other writers, and Nayuta, aged seventeen at the time and one of the stars of the evening, was led over by her editor. Her lovely features blushed wildly as her eyes welled with emotion. Those eyes were planted squarely upon Itsuki, and the first words out of her mouth were:

“...I love you.”

Itsuki, along with everyone else in the group, did an immediate spit take.

“...Your work, I mean,” she continued.

“Say that *first!*” everyone commented at once. She didn’t let it bother her, at least not externally. Itsuki studied her face, a little dubious, as her fair skin gradually began to take on an even paler hue, and then:

“Hrgghhhhhh...”

A reversal of fortune.

It was, for Itsuki, his first experience with an anonymous girl coming up to him and immediately heaving all over him. Or an anonymous *anyone*, really. Apparently, as he learned later, running into an author she respected so much sent her nerves into overdrive, along with her stomach.

Nayuta and her editor paid a visit to Itsuki’s apartment two days later with a box of chocolates and enough cash to cover the trip to the cleaners. He gladly accepted both. *She’s got a good eye, he thought, appreciating the work of someone like myself. I’ll be a good mentor for her. I could write a nice blurb for the cover of her novel, or maybe we could have a little private writers’ workshop... Ah-hah-hah-hah-hah!!*

He had believed he had the upper hand back then, and yet...



“I’m kinda hungry, Itsuki.”

Nayuta sounded totally indifferent as she lobbed a comment at Itsuki, who was sitting at his work desk. The clock showed seven in the evening.

“Yeah, maybe it’s about time for dinner. Anything you in the mood for?”

“I want your hard cock.”

“Oh, hey, there’s some leftover shrimp and fried rice Chihiro made for me yesterday. How ’bout we go with that?”

“...If you’re gonna ignore me, why’d you bother to ask?”

Itsuki took care not to look at the sullen Nayuta as he stumbled

into the kitchen and moved a couple of plastic containers from the refrigerator to the microwave.

Soon, the two began eating around the kotatsu. Nayuta huffed and puffed to cool the fried rice down as she nibbled at it—almost like a cat, Itsuki thought.

“Hff, hff... All this delicious homemade food I get to eat by the kotatsu whenever I come to visit... Will you marry me?”

“Shut up, Kanikou. I didn’t even make this. Don’t you have a family to live with? If you want a home-cooked meal, go to them.”

“My mom’s out of the house a lot. She hasn’t been making food for us too much lately.”



“Oh? So learn to cook for yourself.”

Nayuta stared squarely at the once-again-overbearing Itsuki.

“...Like *you* know how to cook anything.”

“...Oof.”

Itsuki felt a bit pained at the idea of relying on his younger brother for the rest of his life. He thought he'd like to take over a bit of the cooking, and while he'd never actually do it, it was the thought that counted.

“Hey, look, if I had a god-tier sister like Kobato from *Haganai* or Komachi from *My Youth Romantic Comedy*, I bet I'd seriously wanna learn to cook for her, all right?”

“...You're still that obsessed with little sisters, huh? How about someone a little bossier, like Kirino from *Oreimo*?”

“Yeah, sure. I'd love to cook a whole spread for her, but I wouldn't. I'd much rather she pointed at me and went like, ‘You can't even *cook*? You really *are* totally worthless!’”

Nayuta sized up Itsuki, rather impressed at the instantaneous reply.

“...You're sick, you know that?”

“I'd like nothing better than a sister to infect me! ...But seriously, my lack of a little sister pretty much lies at the core of my inability to cook or clean. Life would be totally awesome, twenty-four hours a day, if I had one. Where did I go wrong, I ask you?”

“...I guess you'll have to ask your parents for a favor or two.”

It was the most realistic option, Nayuta figured. It made the normally loquacious Itsuki turn awkwardly mum.

“...That's getting kind of...real, don't you think? Could we, like, steer away from that?”

His father and Chihiro's mother had been married for three years. They had a fine relationship; the wife was still in the prime of her thirties, and from a biological standpoint, it was entirely possible they could conceive a new son or daughter. But what if that *did* happen? How should he react? Itsuki wasn't sure.

“You are such a pain sometimes,” Nayuta said, smiling gently as she shook her head a little. “How's the work on your new series coming along? The one where your heroine isn't a little-sister stereotype for a change?”

Itsuki had asked Nayuta to read through chapter 1 of *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (final title TBD). She had loved it, begging him to let her see more as he progressed. But Itsuki just frowned in reply.

“Hmph... I wound up trashing it,” Itsuki replied moodily.

Her face flushed with surprise, Nayuta exclaimed, “Trashing it...? Why?”

“I finished chapter two, and that asshole editor of mine insisted that I do a rewrite. I wasn’t that enthusiastic about it in the first place, but if I have to do his bidding to keep my plotline going, I figured I might as well go back to square one.”

“...That’s a shame. It was neat, too.”

Nayuta looked honestly disappointed. It made Itsuki feel a tad guilty.

“...But if you look at it another way, I guess I’m the only person besides your editor who ever got to read that, aren’t I? Makes me feel like I’m someone very special to you.”

“Nah, I had Miyako and Haruto read it, too.”

These were both acquaintances of theirs.

“...So that manuscript was seeing other people? That skank.”

Nayuta pouted to herself a bit again before going back to her fried-rice-nibbling mission.



After hanging out and doing nothing long enough to miss the last train home (on purpose), Nayuta wound up spending the night in Itsuki’s apartment.

...I can’t believe how much I love Itsuki. Man, I wanna get down and dirty with him so bad. I wanna just...

She let her consummate powers of imagination as an accomplished author go hog wild as she took a hot shower, conjuring up images far too erotic for publication (or to even say out loud), and let out charming little panting noises as her face melted. It was no expression she’d ever dare to show anyone.

Nayuta had first become smitten with Itsuki at the age of fifteen, when she entered high school. She had been the victim of some vicious bullying at school, which kept her away for extended periods of time. Sometime around then, she happened to pick up his first book. Its story was a complete mess, a giant run-on mishmash scribbled off at breakneck speed, but it was packed with an unmistakable energy. From cover to cover, you could tell that the author truly loved his characters, believed in his plot, and was having too much fun writing it—and living life, for that matter.

The fact that the author was still in high school, revealed in the afterword, came as a shock to Nayuta. One sentence in particular had resonated with her: *I’m not that gifted physically or academically, and I don’t have too many friends, but I have this habit of continually daydreaming during class, and eventually it led me to write a novel.* It was a pretty innocent, artless thing to say, something Itsuki would never

write now, but he brought honesty and modesty into that first piece of work.

In his own way, Itsuki Hashima taught Nayuta that even if you can't find a place of your own at school, there's a whole other world out there for you. It made her wonder whether she could turn out like him, too—and if she could, she wanted to, deeply. And thus, well before they met or even knew what the other looked like, she was smitten with him.

She then wrote her first novel, submitted it to the contest just like Itsuki, and won a prize, just like him. And that was all the motivation she needed to drop out of high school—a formality, really; she hadn't attended in a long time anyway. The prize money, along with the royalties that came streaming in, she handed over to her parents, a token of thanks for all the trouble she had caused them. Even with her current string of hits and monthly paychecks reaching frankly unthinkable figures, Mom and Dad were still handling all her finances. Money didn't matter to Nayuta—being together with Itsuki was what filled her with joy.



And if there was one great wish she had in the world, it was for Itsuki to finally accept her, fully and truly.

“...And instead all he cares for are these trite little-sister girls from his novels.”

Leaving the bathroom naked, her face buried in Itsuki's boxer shorts as she took in the smell and the feel of the fabric, Nayuta sighed.



The noise from the running water made it hard to focus on writing, so Itsuki put on his headphones and cranked up the music to high volume. That, too, wasn't very conducive to his creative juices. But it certainly beat imagining Nayuta naked.

Nayuta had first confessed her love to him on the occasion when she visited his apartment right after hurling on him.

“Ah, don't worry about it. Everyone makes mistakes if they get butterflies in their stomach like that. I'm not the kinda small-minded man who holds a grudge over that stuff, ha-ha-ha!” he'd said after her apology.

Nayuta breathed a visible sigh of relief, then took an even deeper breath.

“Also, I love you, sir. Could we maybe be a couple?”

“Hyah! Hah...hah...urrrp. Krpbbbh?! ”

The mask of the broad-minded published author peeled itself off as Itsuki completely lost all presence of mind in the most pathetic of fashions.

“Wh-what are you talking about, Ms. Kani?!”

Nayuta's editor looked just as surprised at this turn of events. Nayuta didn't let it faze her.

“Ever since I first saw your work,” she began, “I've always been in love with you. When I got to meet you at the awards ceremony, that made me realize how real that feeling truly was. It's not that I love your work or that I love you as an author—I love *you*, Itsuki Hashima, in the romantic kind of way. I am infatuated with you. I need you to be my lover.”

Every piece of her body language indicated she was telling the unadorned truth. It made Itsuki fall into a panic. “...Um, um, l-let me think about it? A little...?” he managed to stammer as Nayuta was all but dragged out of the room by her editor.

Then he rolled into his bed and pondered over it, mind racing. This was the first time a woman had done anything like that to him. He'd never had a girlfriend before. To him, this was as life changing an event as winning that award. Nayuta wasn't the little sister he wanted, strictly speaking, but she was beautiful and buxom, and being told by her that she loved him certainly wasn't a depressing thought.

So, as he regained his composure over time, Itsuki's mind quickly became tinted with shades of red and pink.

"Ohhhhhhhh, maaaaaaaannnnn, what am I gonna dooooooo?! I mean, I know I don't wanna lose my V-card to anyone except the person I marry, but... Pfft-hee-hee-hee-hee! We don't really even know what we're like or anything yet, toooo... It's not just about your face or your body, riiiiight? There's also, like, personality and stuff? It's not like we can go out and, and, and start p-p-playing a-roouund or whatever? We take it slow, get to know each other, and gradually get closer, right? That's how it uuuuusually works, um...?"

His eyes fell upon a paper bag on the kotatsu table with his publisher's logo on it. It contained the box of chocolates and a single book from Nayuta—*The Silvery Landscape*, her first work, due out wherever books were sold the following week.

...I'm not a big fan of the cover art. The title's pretty plain Jane, and based on the back-cover blurb, it doesn't have a little-sister heroine or anything, so I'm not exactly thrilled about it. But maybe reading this will teach me a little about her...?

These were the types of feelings Itsuki had as he began reading through *The Silvery Landscape*. They didn't last long.

"This... This is on a *totally different level...*," he said, voice shaking, after finishing the book in a single sitting.

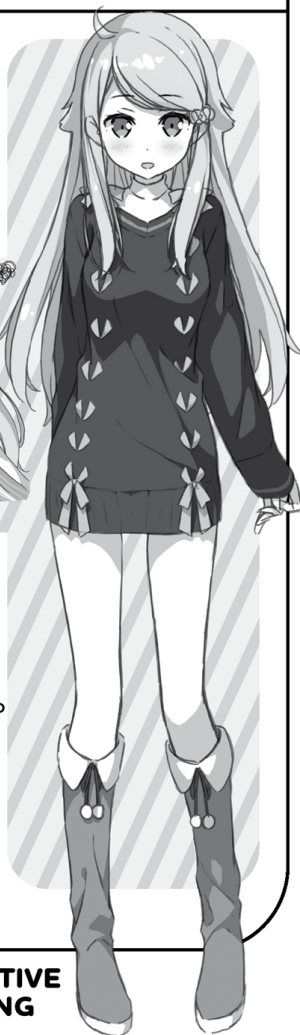
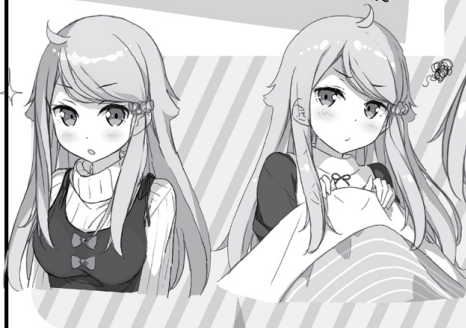
He then replied to Nayuta's offer three days later.

NAYUTA KANI

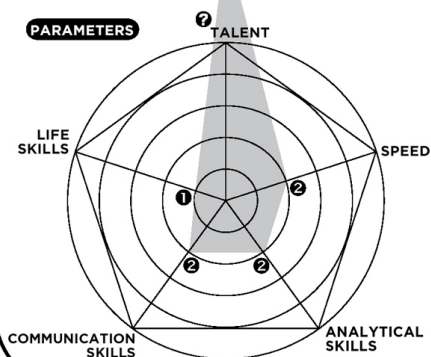
AGE: 18

A young genius novelist shooting onto the scene like a blazing comet. She's 100 percent driven by her love for Itsuki.

Novels: *The Silvery Landscape*, *The Golden Landscape*, *The Ashen Landscape*, *The Pale Landscape*



PARAMETERS



**A HIGH-END, SLIGHTLY DEFECTIVE
BEAUTY WITH HEAVY-PUNCHING
TALENTS...AND LOVE**

College Girls and Their Assorted Types

Quitting halfway through his freshman year didn't give Itsuki Hashima the time to make many college friends. He had only one real acquaintance left from that era that he bothered to maintain.

That was Miyako Shirakawa, aged twenty and now a sophomore. She was the same age as Itsuki and was in the same college department, making them sort of ex-classmates. She had an air of refinement, the classic big-city college student, and she had a cute sort of beauty to her. Her light brown hair had a gentle wave—all natural, no dyes or perms. Her flashy looks made her popular throughout grade school, but she had yet to enjoy a steady boyfriend.

The two of them had first spoken about a month after their first semester began. It was a time most freshmen used to squeeze the most out of their newfound freedom—joining clubs, going to parties, getting part-time jobs, making new friends and lovers. But Itsuki was the guy in the department who was always alone. Whenever he wasn't in class, he was there in the back row, staring intently at the screen of his laptop as he typed away, occasionally grinning to himself or twisting his face up in pain. He put it away during class, but his written notes clearly had little to do with the topic of the lecture as his face alternated through a whirlwind of emotions—smiles, intense concentration, occasionally sheer pathos. And when class was over, he'd go right back home.

Her friends laughed as they called the guy all kinds of mean things—weird, emo, friendless—but Miyako had a different impression. She felt as if he had something really important that drove him, something far more vital than college classes or playing around with friends or falling in love. Something more concrete. Something that Miyako and her friends—more or less drifting through college, bobbing around in life as the semester wore on—didn't have.

After a while of this, Miyako finally decided to ask this guy, Itsuki Hashima, what he was doing on his computer all day. “Bwuhh?” he replied. “I—I don't... What do you mean?”

“Come on—I won't tell,” she said in response to this clearly suspicious behavior. It was a hard push, she knew, but in a moment, Itsuki finally told the truth. “A novel? Do you wanna become a

novelist or something, Hashima?"

"Well, no, um," a distressed-looking Itsuki began. "...I guess I kinda am...already."

Since he wrote under his real name, it didn't take long for Miyako to check out the college bookstore and find a single novel under the name Itsuki Hashima. She picked it up and read it, and to be frank, she didn't really get it.

The next day, sitting next to him in class, she commented, "I tried reading your novel, but it didn't make a whole lot of sense to me."

"Pfft!" he replied, like a sullen child. "That novel's not meant for easy college girls like you!"

This evaluation understandably offended Miyako. People had been lobbing insults like that at her based on looks alone ever since middle school, but it was the first time anyone had said it to her face.

"Hey, I'm not easy, you prick! And if it's not meant for me, then who's it meant for, anyway? And why does kissing his little sister give the main guy all these magic powers?!"

"Hah-hah-hah! I guess an easy ho like you would have trouble figuring out the deep, sacred mythology behind the sisterly bond!"

"I told you, I'm not easy! I've never even had a— Look, we aren't talking about that! Your story wouldn't make sense to anybody!"

"Oh, is that what you think? Well, too bad! You read *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, right? That's my second series, and Volume One of that sold over a hundred thousand copies!"

"What? No way. Something like *that*...?"

The blurted-out reaction rubbed Itsuki exactly the wrong way. "What do you mean, '*that*'?" he shot back. "'*That*' broke a hundred thousand copies, which means there's at least a hundred thousand people out there who fully understood what *you* couldn't! And here you are, in public, all like, 'Aww, gee, I don't understaaand it!' Aren't you ashamed of yourself? That's so hilarious, it's practically sad! I mean, being stupid isn't anything to feel bad about, but it should be a crime how brazen you are with flaunting your idiocy for all to see! A stupid ho like you oughta realize just how stupid she really is and go crawl into a hole or something!"

Crack!

The torrent of insults finally drove Miyako to slap him straight on the cheek.

"Ah...wha...?!"

Miyako stared right at the dumbfounded Itsuki. Tears fell from her eyes.

"You didn't have to say all that, you asshole! Nnngh...!"

"Oh, um, wait, uh... Ummm, all right. Maybe, perhaps, there's the possibility that I went just a little too far, all right? I had a crappy

review like that written for me on Amazon the other day, and it really pissed me off, so...um... Like, I'm sor... I apolo... Look, can you just stop crying, you easy ho?!"

"For Chrissake, I'm not easy! And I'm not crying!"

"No, you clearly are."

"I'm not, and I'm not easy!"

"O-okay, okay... All right... You aren't crying, and you aren't easy..."



“Damn right I’m not!!”

Then, simultaneously realizing they were now the center of attention, Itsuki and Miyako instantly reddened.

“...Oh, geez... Now everybody’s gonna think I’m some kind of nutcase...”

“...Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. We all *know* you’re a nutcase.”

That was their first contact, and for whatever reason, Miyako and Itsuki kept talking after that. To an impartial viewer, the exchange must have looked like a disaster, but to Miyako, curiosity still won out over disgust.

His obsessions over little-sister characters remained a total mystery to her, but he was willing to lend her a bunch of neat books and games, and it was interesting to listen to him talk about the publishing industry and the work he did for it. It felt kind of nice to offer fashion advice for his novels’ female characters, too.

That was why it was such a shock, after summer break ended and the second part of the Japanese school year began, when Itsuki suddenly informed Miyako that he was leaving school. The news came in the form of a text that arrived on her phone just after she stepped out of the bath.

“I quit school”

Just three words, provided to the only college friend he had, without previous discussion or indication that anything was amiss in his life. It shocked and saddened her so much that she didn’t even bother putting on any clothes before calling him.

Over the phone, Itsuki was just as arrogant and self-centered as always. “Hah-hah-hah-hah! I’m a writing genius! I made it in the Oricon top ten and everything! It all made me realize that college is just a waste of time for me!”

He probably meant it, Miyako reasoned. College meant nothing to him, to the point that he felt three words were enough to explain his behavior. To her, it felt as if it should be a much more monumental decision. In some ways, his being able to follow through with that on a whim, without consulting anyone for advice, made her incredibly envious.

The words “waste of time,” in particular, struck home with Miyako. As she fought back the tears that came out for no reason she could articulate, she wailed, “Oh, *really*! Well, good luck not getting dropped by your publisher, then!”

Her choice of words was harsh, but deep down, she knew she didn’t want to let him go. That was why, as she swore to herself on that day, she still made regular visits to Itsuki’s place. It was just a

five-minute walk from campus, so using it as someplace to kill free time didn't seem unnatural at all...or so she thought.

But today, she was back there again, ringing the bell until she heard the latch turn. Quickly, she prepared the excuse she had conjured up.

"I-Itsuki! I have some free time, and the library's totally packed, so lemme use your place to study for my—"

She was greeted not by Itsuki but by a beautiful silver-haired girl in her underwear.

"Wha... Nayu...?!"

"Oh. Hey," Nayuta sleepily groaned at the beet-red, half-frantic Miyako. "Good morning, Myaa. Itsuki's still sleeping. We were at it until early in the morning, so..."

"At i—?! Oh... Well, sorry I interrupted you, then...!"

"Oh, wait a second, Myaa. If you're leaving, is it okay if I come with you for a bit?"

She was already edging away from the door when Nayuta stopped her.



After Nayuta got some clothes on, she and Miyako began walking to the rail station. Unlike Miyako, who was going around in a daring miniskirt despite the wintry season, Nayuta was in a long, puffy coat, a scarf, gloves, and earmuffs—the full suit of armor. Seeing her waddle around in these layers reminded Miyako of the cat her family kept back at home.

Ever since they met, Nayuta had acted terribly friendly toward her. Miyako, for her part, found her a little odd...all right, a lot odd, but still nice enough.

"So, Myaa, I actually wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh...?" Miyako replied, eyes still glazed over.

"Yeah. Itsuki hasn't done anything sexy with me lately."

"Huhh?!" Miyako exclaimed, voice half breaking. "So, so that's where your relationship is, or...? W-wait, but didn't you say you were 'at it' until this morning or whatever...?"

"Yeah. And after I fell asleep, he kept on writing after that, too."

"Geez, then start with that! But if he hasn't been doing it 'lately,' does that mean you've...you know, done it in the...past?"

"From the moment I met him until this very instant, Itsuki hasn't had sex with me once."

"Then say that! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"Hee-hee! Call it the 'unreliable narrator.'"

“Can you stop being unreliable for no reason, please?” Miyako complained, even as her heart filled with relief. “...But why didn’t you have any clothes on before, then?”

“I was snuggled up naked next to Itsuki in bed, but then the doorbell rang, so I threw my bra and panties on real quick.”

“Nope, no longer relieved!”

Ignoring Miyako’s sudden panic attack, Nayuta continued. “Well, you’re pretty easy, right, Myaa? With your experience, what do you think I should do to make Itsuki horny for me?”

“‘Horny’...? And I’m not easy, all right?”

“You aren’t? I thought that college girls were all supposed to be walking blow job machines.”

“Ugh! You and Itsuki... Could you even *have* a more prejudiced view of me? ...I mean, all right, I *do* have a friend or two that likes to play around a...pretty decent amount, but...”

“So are you a virgin, Myaa?” Nayuta asked, tilting her head like an inquisitive puppy.

“What? Of course not! I’ve had a few BFs in my life!”

She hadn’t, but something drove Miyako to pretend otherwise for appearance’s sake.

“Wow, Myaa. I should have known, I guess. You’re so grown-up.”

Miyako broke into a cold sweat at the sight of Nayuta’s reverent eyes.

“I wish I could be doing it with Itsuki all the time, like you have, Myaa.”

“It—it’s not all the time... And stop making it sound like *I’ve* hooked up with him, too... You think I would?! No way!” She blushed again. “...I have no idea what you see in that sister-obsessed moron...”

“Everything. I love everything about him.”

The instant reply came back like a boomerang and stunned Miyako into silence. In a way, someone like Nayuta, so freely able to talk about exactly who and what she loved, made her jealous. It drove her to say something she normally wouldn’t.

“...Yeah, well... Good luck with that. I’ll be rooting for you.”

Nayuta responded with a sweet, elfin smile. “Thank you very much, Myaa. I never had any friends, so I’m really glad I got to meet you.”

“Oh...? Well, I’m glad I got to be friends with you, too, Nayu...”

The words didn’t exactly form a lie, but Miyako still said them with a terribly guilty conscience.



Miyako and Nayuta had first met about half a year ago, on a day just like today. Miyako was visiting Itsuki's apartment, and Nayuta was already there.

"A college friend who reads my manuscripts sometimes" was how Itsuki chose to introduce Miyako. Nayuta, at first anyway, had trouble hiding her hostility. She wasn't expecting this incredibly gorgeous college girl enjoying the prime of her life—"I mean, she's Itsuki's friend!" as she later put it.

Later, once Itsuki conked out after an all-night writing session, the two of them decided to go out for a bit. Nayuta took the occasion to lob an immediate fastball her way.

"So are you in love with Itsuki, Ms. Shirakawa?"

Miyako instinctively parried. "Wh-what? Of course not! He's just a friend, is all!"

That made Nayuta breathe a sigh of relief, but she still kept a wary eye on this potential rival. "Well, I am. Itsuki means everything to me," she declared, making sure it was clear that the words were meant as a warning.

"What could you possibly like about that sister-crazy loon?" Miyako asked, flinching at the show of force.

It was Nayuta's cue to explain exactly how Itsuki's novels had saved her life—the bullying she'd faced in middle school and all that. It was an appalling tale, and Nayuta told it virtually unvarnished, detailing the exact level of desperation she'd felt at the time—using all the expressive genius she harnessed for her own novels.

Her hope was that mentioning Itsuki's enormous presence in her life as a savior would keep Miyako in check before she had any chance to rival her in love.

Instead, it chiefly served to enrage Miyako. Her face was a mess, she shed tears the size of raisins, and her nose ran as her heart swelled at the tale of the cruel misfortunes Nayuta had faced. She cursed the bullies that had tormented her, feeling in full the sadness she must have felt.

"Ugh, if only I was there!" she wailed. "I woulda kicked all of their asses for you—I promise!"

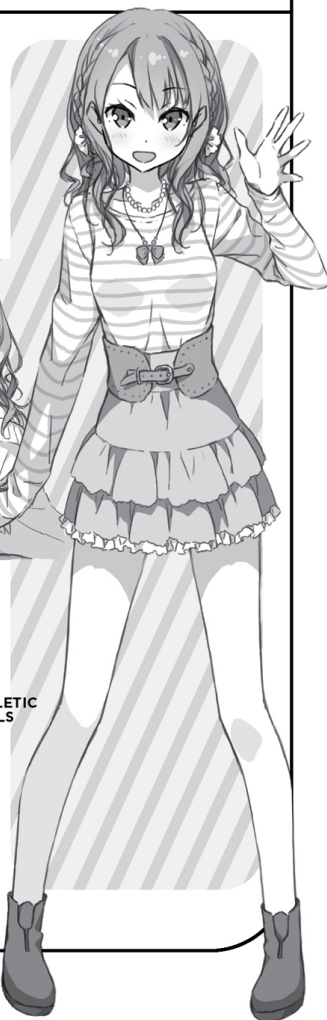
Nayuta stared blankly at her, not anticipating this onrush of emotion. Then, unconsciously, she began to smile. *Ooh. This girl's seriously crying for me. She's getting all pissed off for me. She's nice. I like her.*

So, without much further encouragement, she took a liking to Miyako. And, even after half a year passed, she still wasn't exactly sure what Miyako thought about Itsuki.

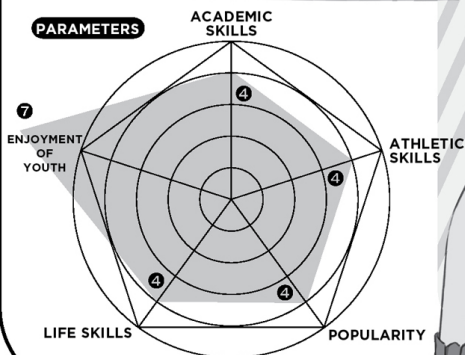
MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

AGE: 20

Itsuki's friend from his abortive college career. A caring, sister-like figure, although she often tends to get caught up in other people's drama.



PARAMETERS



**LOST IN LOVE, LOST IN
FRIENDSHIP, LOST IN
DREAMS... THE TRIPLE CROWN
OF YOUTH**

The Occasional Guy Friend

“Helloooo! It’s your hot friend.”

This evening, Itsuki was hard at work in his apartment, as he always was, when the sound of both a doorbell and an unfortunate comment reached his ears.

Frowning, Itsuki went to greet his visitor. And unpleasant though the comment was, the person standing outside his apartment was indeed a hottie.

He was in his early twenties, with sharp eyes, distinctly graceful features, narrow-rimmed glasses, and a crop of bleached light brown hair to complete his artless charm. Despite his wiry frame, nothing about his physique seemed unhealthy, and his legs spoke for around half his stature.

He was smiling warmly, and everything about him made you feel right at home.

Itsuki hated it when a truly attractive young man acknowledged his own looks, since he had no idea how to respond. That said, modest protests of “But I’m nooot” to accusations of hotness were equally irritating. Thus: “Hot guys should all drop dead. QED.”

“What was the argument?”

Even after being told to go eff himself, the handsome young man just gave a wry grin. There was something oddly invigorating about that smile he had.

Itsuki didn’t know his real name, but he wrote under the name Haruto Fuwa. He was another writer, working for the same publisher as Itsuki, and he had made his pro debut at around the same time as Itsuki after winning a prize in the same contest.

“Hey, Itsuki. Doing okay?”

“Hmph. Yeah, pretty much.”

“Keepin’ your dick clean?”

“D-don’t say that outside!”

Haruto laughed as Itsuki visibly reddened. “Aw, come on—it’s fine! You know your neighbors and the people above and below us are college students, right? They’re all in class right now.”

“...Why do you know more about who lives in this building than I do?” Itsuki said with a groan, squinting. “Come on in.”

“Thanks. Here, I got a present for you. Lemme put ‘em in the fridge.”

“Sure.”

Haruto opened the refrigerator door as if it were his own and put in a few bottles of imported beer that he’d brought along in a tote bag. Once he did, he removed two bottles from the fridge that had already been in there—two Belgian beers, the Tripel and Christmas from Gouden Carolus. Despite living alone, Itsuki had a fridge large enough for a nuclear family; it was about a fifth full of leftovers from Chihiro’s meals and three-fifths full of alcohol. The rest was occupied by plastic bottles of water, tea, or sports drinks, as well as ham, cheese, sausages, chocolate, dried fruit, and other snacky things to pair with beer.

As close as Itsuki’s place was to the publishing house, Haruto almost always stopped by before hitting the Editorial Department.

“Hey, I’m gonna borrow a dish, okay?”

Without waiting for confirmation, Haruto grabbed a large platter from the kitchen, opened the bag of ham he’d taken out with the beer, lined up a few slices along the outer edges, and filled the center with a neatly arranged assortment of cheese and dried fruit. This he placed in the center of the kotatsu before grabbing two name-brand Gouden Carolus chalices from the shelf, giving them a quick rinse, and placing them next to the desk, along with a bottle opener.

“Here ya go,” he said as he sat by the kotatsu, completing the work as neatly and cleanly as Chihiro.

“Mm-hmm,” Itsuki replied, giving him a composed nod. He had been reading manga at the kotatsu while his guest, Haruto, prepared the food and drink.

“Pick your poison.” Haruto said, both beers in hand.

Itsuki pointed at the Christmas beer. “That one.”

“Right.” Haruto opened the bottle and poured out the deep-brown contents. The scent of herbs and spices filled the room as the beer formed a head in the glass.

“Well, another day down.”

“Yep.”

With a light clinking of glasses, Itsuki accepted his drink. He was just about to bring it to his lips when Haruto stopped him.

“Hang on.”

“Mm?”

“Can you give me the peace sign over the dish for a sec?”

“...Like this?” a quizzical Itsuki asked as he put his glass down and made a pair of scissors with his index and middle fingers over the somewhat attractively laid-out snack spread. Haruto did the same close by with his left hand, then shot a pic with the smartphone in his

right.

"All right, thanks. Let's see... 'Eating with my co-prize winner Itsuki Hashima at his joint! ^^ I've been here like three times a week lately, guess it's about time to get married~~"

"...What are you doing?"

"Oh, just **actin' gay** on Twitter," Haruto said as he punched away at his screen.

"...?" Itsuki raised an eyebrow.

"Well, y'know, I'm starting to get my name known lately, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Chevalier of the Absolute World, Haruto's launch series, wasn't quite as much a phenomenon as *The Silvery Landscape*, but it was still among their publisher's five best-performing titles. The anime adaptation was slated to premiere on TV this coming April, and that meant a lot more exposure for Haruto, thanks to autograph sessions and coverage in anime mags, on Internet news portals, and on video sites. His attractive features had already earned him the semiofficial nickname "the Heartthrob Novelist."

Haruto's work was mainly read by younger males, an audience that wouldn't generally care much what the author looked like. Some of them, however, expressed open hostility at how handsome his headshots were, a few voicing non-ironic concern that he might try making a pass or two at some of the anime's voice cast.

"So that's why I'm gaying up my persona a little," he explained. "If people think I like screwin' around with the dudes more than the girls, that means voice-actress fanboys won't start hating on me...and ladies who dig that sort of thing will start flocking to me. Two birds with one stone."

"...What a life," a half-exasperated but still sympathetic Itsuki commented. "But wait. What about me? Am I your unwilling partner now, or...?"

"Mm? Sure. Wanna be gay buds?"

"Hell no!" shouted Itsuki at the careless pitch. "Why do I have to change sexual identities just to cover your ass?"

"Aw, what's the big deal? Maybe you'll earn some new fans that way."

"I don't need fans like that! I want my books to sell based off my characters, not what kind of character *I* am!"

"...Ooh," Haruto exclaimed, face suddenly serious. "Man, you sure get all hung up over the weirdest stuff sometimes," he said with a grin. "Why do you care if the world thinks you're batting for the other team?"

"Are you seriously that stupid? When I marry the ultimate little-sister voice actress who's playing the ultimate little-sister heroine in

the anime version of my magnum opus, what am I gonna do if people think it's a cover or something?"

"Whoa, you want to marry a voice actress, Itsuki?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't be an idiot! I've got zero desire to get married, but don't you like how that sounds? The idea of voice actresses fawning over you? 'Cause I sure do, hee-hee-hee-heeee!"

"...Are you getting enough sleep?" Haruto asked, looking honestly worried.

"...Um, yeah... I just kinda hit a wall in my work." Itsuki nodded, face in a ω-style pout.

"...Oh? Maybe you better not drink today, then?"

"No, I will. Maybe getting wasted will give me some new ideas!"

Itsuki brought the beer to his lips. The brilliant mix of spices tickled his nostrils, the heavy sweetness spreading in his mouth, only to give way to a complex but comfortable bitterness. Gouden Carolus Christmas clocked in at 10.5 percent alcohol by volume, about twice what you saw in mainstream Japanese beer, and the flavor hid the alcohol so well that glugging it down was dangerously easy. "Ooh... That's good." Itsuki exhaled, his eyelids already becoming heavy.

"Hey, don't keep that pace up." Haruto grinned as he took a sip, rolling it around on his tongue. "You got writer's block, huh? Is it that *Demon Hunter* thing? The first non-sister heroine in the Hashima oeuvre?"

"...Nah, I shit-canned that," Itsuki said, a tad apologetic.

Haruto kept a close eye on recent trends in novels and anime. Itsuki had had a few discussions with him along those lines while devising *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (tent.). He had even gone over the opening with him.

"Shit-canned? Seriously? Why?"

"Because my heroines have to be little-sister characters, man! I'm just tryin' to think up the ultimate in sisters in my new project. Something nobody's come up with before!"

"...You're sure taking that mania of yours to the deep end," Haruto said with an exasperated grin, grabbing a piece of dried fruit between sips. "...I got a younger sister myself, but—real talk for one second—there's nothing that great about them, you know? She whines constantly at every little thing I do; she starts beating on me at the slightest provocation; she calls my books 'disgusting' or 'boring'; she reads interviews done with me and calls them 'horrible' or 'gross'... She drives me crazy."

"You dumbass! Don't lump *my* sister in with that piece of garbage disguised as *your* sister!"

"Garbage...?! Geez, she's not *that* bad! I mean, she was pretty cute when she was younger, and she bought snacks for me whenever I

came down with a cold... Also, you don't even have a sister!"

"Sure I do!"

"Huh?"

"Right here, inside my heart!"

"Oh... Right..." Haruto flashed him a look of pure pity. "...But, again, straight talk for a sec: I know I don't have the 'little sister' bug that you have, but your novels lately... Like, I think they're veering way off the highway, you know? I've been seeing people on the Net say the same thing, too, like, 'I can't identify with the hero anymore' and stuff."

"Why're you reading reviews of *my* books online...?"

"Oh, no reason. I just like reading impressions of other people's stuff."

"Hmph..."

A little peeved, Itsuki refilled his empty glass and downed it in one drink. "Well, I know. I know there're takes like that going around, in certain circles. I dismissed most of them as the demented ravings of idiots who don't understand the difference between Amazon reviews and their personal journal or the stupid trolls who lurk around the anonymous boards. But my editor said the teen readers sending survey forms back are starting to say the same thing more and more, and I'd like to think there's some value to that feedback, at least..."

He took another big gulp from his glass, eyes starting to glaze over.

"But!" he shouted, slamming a palm against the kotatsu. "I'm not going to succumb to the bleatings of that low-minded rabble! If I let people who say I'm 'going too far' dull my blade at this point, I'll never reach the ultimate in little sisters! I've got to keep pushing it, all the way to the edge—create a world with my own hands, drenched in originality like none seen before with the ultimate, undefeatable, absolute god of a sister that'll make 'em all bow for forgiveness! She'll take those idiotic haters and tear their very souls to shreds!"

He chugged the rest to hammer the point home.

Itsuki's speech, covering his passion for the little-sister ideal and his sheer distaste for his editor, continued for a while, and Haruto interjected a little "Yeah" or "Right, totally" now and again as he listened. Before long, however, Itsuki's drunkenness had proceeded to the point where he began to reply "Nyanpasu" to everything.

"Yeesh... Don't say I didn't warn you about your pace, man..."

"Nyanpasu," the semiconscious Itsuki warbled, waving a hand distractedly in the air as he kept his eyes closed.

"...Do you know your name?"

"Nyanpasu!"

"...Do you remember your address, maybe?"

“Nyanpasu!”

“Nyanpasuuuuuu?”

“Nyan...pasu...?”

Itsuki sprawled back, and that was it. A look of abject bliss was on his face as he slept. Haruto grinned at it.

“...Bet Nanyu would love to see this,” he said as he took a close-up shot of him, although he simply put his phone back in his pocket instead of sending it to her.

“Fnnhh... Nyan...pasu...”

Haruto filled up his own glass as he watched Itsuki talk in his sleep.

“Well, hang in there, man... It just gives me a chance to get an even bigger leg up on you, while geniuses like you trap yourselves in pointless nonsense...”



The smile on Haruto's face was just as attractive and refreshing as always, but the color in his eyes seemed to almost burn with passion.



After taking a couple of hours to wrap up the beer and snacks and do all the washing up, Haruto pulled the still-blacked-out Itsuki out from the kotatsu, laid him on his bed, and left. He shuddered as he stepped outside, the frigid wind robbing the heat from his alcohol-warmed body.

To Haruto Fuwa, Itsuki Hashima was his friend, drinking partner, industry war buddy fighting for the same publisher, troublesome little-brother-like presence, and *enemy*, one he hoped he could beat someday.

They had both earned nods in the same new-author contest, but the written evaluations of their submitted work couldn't have been more different. Haruto still couldn't forget the judges' commentary for the two of them.

"The unrefined content plays host to a wealth of issues, and we're honestly unsure if releasing this to the public would be the right thing, but it also carries unfathomable impact. It's something only this author could ever have written, and we're extremely curious to see how he grows and matures as a creative talent going forward."

"A very expertly put-together piece, obviously from someone well versed in current trends. Its quality makes it easily publishable as is—and hey, maybe it'd sell pretty decently, too [he says, idly picking his nose]."

Which review applied to which author should be obvious.

He had wanted to punch out several of the judges after reading that evaluation, but when he actually read Itsuki's published work, it was suddenly clear to Haruto: He was beaten.

Yes, maybe Haruto's series clearly outsold Itsuki's, scoring that anime version and all that, but this in no way meant he himself felt victorious. Fame, royalties, reader reviews—all those external standards meant nothing against the supreme sense of defeat he felt. That feeling only deepened a year ago when he first ran into Nayuta Kani, a girl who became an author after reading Itsuki's work—a girl whose life Itsuki literally changed forever with his writing.

There are, generally speaking, two types of novelists: the artist, who wields their personal emotions as their mightiest weapon, and the craftsman, who analyzes what the market wants and hones their work to match. These aren't hard categories; most people fall in between somewhere, from the artist with a few craftsmanlike qualities to the middle-of-the-roader who leans a bit craftsman. But Itsuki and Nayuta were textbook artists, while Haruto was the pinnacle of the craftsman ideal.

These two archetypes, of course, were hardly in competition with each other. One wasn't necessarily better than the other at writing compelling novels. As long as you produced results, there was no reason to beat yourself up about where you fell. If anything, publishers tended to cherish craftsmen and their steady pace and quality over artists, whose emotional states could greatly affect their quality or pace, or even make it impossible for them to write at all.

Haruto knew that, of course. But still...

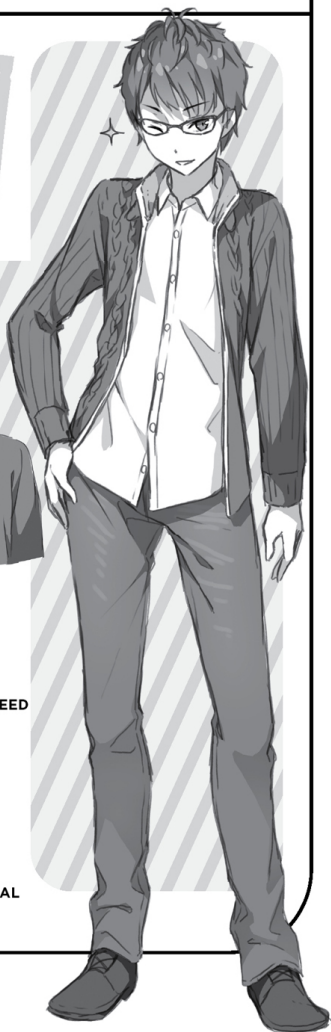
"...Too bad I couldn't have been a genius, too...", he whispered to himself as he disappeared into the night.

HARUTO FUWA

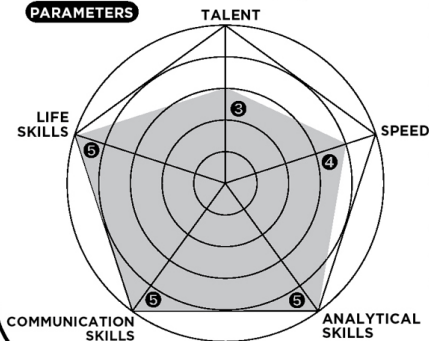
AGE: 22

A novelist who debuted alongside Itsuki. A gifted self-starter with a machinelike sensitivity to current trends.

Novels: *Chevalier of the Absolute World* series (12 volumes)



PARAMETERS



**THE DASHING NOVELIST
WITH EVERYTHING EXCEPT
RAW TALENT**

The Main Theme

Haruto Fuwa had a sister seven years his younger. She was just as pretty, refined-looking, and stylish as her brother, but unlike the easygoing Haruto, she had a sharp, stinging personality. Many were the times a boy attempted to confess his love to her, only to be humiliated by a long string of merciless, heartbreaking insults.

As a younger child, she had hung around Haruto like a dog with its master, constantly fawning over her big bro. Now they didn't even make eye contact in public.

"You're *so late*, Bro!" she whined at Haruto the moment he stepped inside. "You promised you'd help me with homework tonight! What're you gonna do if they yell at me in school tomorrow?"

Haruto sighed and rolled his eyes. "Ah, cram it," he said in a tone he'd never use with anyone else. "Meeting ran long."

"Liar! You were drinking with your friends again! You tweeted about it and everything!"

"Who invited you to look at my Twitter, you ass?"

Haruto clicked his tongue, exasperated. His sister was talking about that appeal to gay sensibilities he'd sent from Itsuki's apartment. Having a member of the family catch it was a tad embarrassing for him.

"...Look, it's late, all right? Let's just get this homework done and go to bed," he said, changing the subject. "Like, are you really stupid enough that you can't do this by yourself?"

"I'm not stupid! I could handle all of this if I really wanted to, but I don't want to waste my valuable time on it! That's why I'm having you help me! You should be thankful, you douche!"

"What the hell, man...?" Haruto wearily droned at the irrational abuse hurled his way as he smoothly motored his way through a sheet of math problems. She was probably right when she said she could handle this if she wanted to; her test scores were among the best in her grade.

If she wanted to, he reminded himself as he wrapped everything up in ten minutes or so.

"Okay, I'm off," he said. His sister stopped him before he could reach his room.

“W-wait a minute! I got some pudding in the fridge, so I’ll let you eat that as your reward.”

“No thanks. I’m just gonna wash up and go to sleep.”

“I wanna eat it, too! Just wait a minute!”

“You’re gonna get fat if you eat that stuff after midnight,” Haruto whispered to himself as his sister jumped out of the room, a tad red-faced. She was back before long, and soon they were staring into each other’s respective pudding cups.

“Hey, uh, Bro?”

“Mm.”

“Y’know, I keep reading your books, and they’re still the most boring things I’ve ever seen. I’ve probably read your new one, like, a hundred times, and I have *no* idea what anybody sees in it.”

“Huh,” Haruto said bluntly. He had heard all of this before.

The reply made his sister puff her cheeks up in anger. “There’s just nothing attractive about the female lead at all! All that stupid ‘fateful encounter’ stuff is so twenty years ago, too... It’s better if the main heroine is closer to the other guy than that. You can get an affinity for her that way, you know?”

“...Closer, huh...? Like, childhood friends? As if *that’s* not a tired old trope.”

“What? What are you, stupid? A childhood friend’s just gonna be another random stranger to you.”

“So what d’you want me to write, then?”

“I don’t know, dummy! That’s *your* job! Oh, and I saw your interview in the anime magazine that came out today, Bro. It was so gross.”

“I’m not gross!”

Haruto had read the interview himself. He hadn’t said anything problematic in it, and while he didn’t like to pat himself on the back, he thought the photo they’d printed flattered him a fair bit.

“You are. You tried to act like some total stud way too much. And that angle in the picture—like, did you ask for that? You aren’t some pop idol, Bro. You seriously thought you’d look cool from that angle? Ugh, you’re disgusting!”

“Will you just shut up?!”

Haruto’s face was reddening as she drove in the point repeatedly.

“You should just, like, put on a bald wig and some pancake makeup. That’d suit you way better, you clown!”

“No, dummy! If I do that, I’ll lose all the female fans I’ve finally started attracting!”

“Bro, you know nobody but a bunch of pale virgin boys reads your stuff! Which is great for you! At least you don’t have to worry about *other* fangirls following you!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Even for male-oriented stories, attracting a female audience is one of the biggest keys to success in this—ow!”

She punched him in the arm.

“You’re being ridiculous! Ugh, forget it! Just get out of here!”

“Whoa, I haven’t finished my pudding—”

“I’ll finish it!”

“You’re gonna get fat if you do that! Or maybe you should!”

“Shut up, you bastard! Just die!”

Haruto, stripped of his half-eaten pudding and punched in the arm, was forced out of the room.

“I hope you turn into a pig!!”

He shouted through the door as he glumly went into his own bedroom.

“Yeesh,” he sighed as he took his computer out of his backpack, hoping to handle a little more work before bedtime. “Maybe *I* oughta rent a place somewhere, too.”

Haruto had been living in the same house, his family’s house, for all twenty-two years of his life. He had considered leaving the roost twice—once when he was accepted into college, once when he made his pro writing debut—but his sister was dead set against it both times. His parents sided with her, so he caved.

No, he believed wholeheartedly, *there’s nothing good about a little sister*.

If Itsuki was around to see this, he’d probably scream “That’s the whole joy of it!!!” and melt into a puddle of pure envy. But Haruto was too much of a realist—too convinced that his flesh and blood hated him too much to fit any of the brother-obsessed or *tsundere* hot-and-cold archetypes of little-sister fiction.

Even if he noticed the truth—that his sister was, in fact, both of those things—it wouldn’t have changed much with him. Because even more than a little sister that would’ve pushed all of Itsuki’s buttons, Haruto Fuwa craved raw, natural talent.

Talent, money, social status, prestige, looks, character, dreams, hopes, acceptance, tranquility, a friend, a lover, a sister.

Whatever a person wants the most, they’ll always find it belonging to someone close to them—and despite how much that person desires what they lack, the other possessing it will often see it as all but worthless.

Someone actually possessing what they want in life is nothing short of miraculous. But the rarity of such miracles is the bountiful well from which most forms of tragedy and comedy are born.

And this world—this tale—pretty much unfolds that way from start to finish.



TALKING TO HARUTO FUWA, CREATOR OF *CHEVALIER OF THE ABSOLUTE WORLD*

Interview X Haruto Fuwa

—So where do you think the charms of *Chevalier* lie?

Fuwa: I think it comes down to a main character who never gives up in the face of insurmountable odds, along with a girl brave and gallant enough to support him on his quest. That's what readers like to root for. It goes without saying, too, that OKINA's illustrations of the Calibre are super-attractive—you can see why he's worked for so long doing mech designs for anime.

—How are you involved in the anime version?

Fuwa: I'm in the room for every script meeting, and I get to check on all the storyboards as well. I really don't have to butt in much at all, though, since the director and scriptwriters have done such a thorough job of studying my work [laughs].

—What should we watch out for in the anime?

Fuwa: I'd hope people are sucked in by the characters, story, music, and so on as a whole, but if I had to bring up one thing, it'd have to be the Calibre action sequences. The screen's barely big enough to hold all the impact they bring, and I think that's something you could only do in anime.

—Fans of yours have taken to nicknaming you the "Heart-throb Novelist."

Fuwa: Oh, I don't know... It's a little hard for me to gauge. It's not like I was ever that popular, even back in school [laughs].

—Oh, no?

Fuwa: No. I just sat around after school and played games with my nerd friends—Monster Hunter and God Eater and stuff. The designs for the dragons and battle scenes in the work were impacted by my experience with those kinds of co-op "hunting" games, I think.

—Any final message for your readers?

Fuwa: I definitely couldn't have made it this far without everybody's support, so first off, thank you! I think this anime won't disappoint; it's going to be amazing, so I hope you'll wait patiently for it. The original novels aren't going to lose out, either—they'll get more and more exciting, too, so I hope you'll keep supporting them!

—Thanks for sitting down with us.

Turtle Soup

Several days had passed since Itsuki Hashima had trashed his idea for *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (final title TBD). He had mostly spent it lazing around his kotatsu, playing mobile games and reading books.

It may have looked like simple goofing off to some, but this was all a vital part of the novel-writing process. Itsuki was in the midst of refining his well of raw ideas into something new, something solid enough to replace *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (final title TBD). Ideas aren't something that simply appears when you sit in front of the PC, ready to do work, and say, "Okay, brain, do your stuff!" Often they come at times like these—when you're relaxing and not focused on work tasks. In the case of Itsuki, he tended to bump into them while gaming, reading, sitting in the bath, or taking a crap.

For a novelist, goofing off and playing around are important work tasks. Seriously. Believe me.

The rest of Itsuki's kotatsu was currently occupied by Haruto Fuwa and Nayuta Kani. Haruto, just back from an editorial session, was organizing his notes from the day's meeting on his tablet. Nayuta, who had stopped by for no reason in particular, was currently seething at Haruto, giving him her best "Itsuki won't bump uglies with me if you're here, so scram" look.

"Okay, done!" Haruto said, putting his tablet on the table.

"Oh, you're all set? Mind going home, then, Prince Manwhore?"

"Could you stop calling me that, Barfalina?" he countered, the handsome smile still on his face.

A while ago, they had all played a card game called Moteneba, or "Gotta Be Popular." The basic idea was to try to become as popular a kid in school as possible so you could attract the attention of girls—a game theme all but guaranteed to ruin friendships. Haruto won by a landslide, of course, destroying the rest of the pack, and that's when Nayuta first busted out the "Prince Manwhore" nickname. "Barfalina," meanwhile, came about because Haruto happened to be around to see Nayuta puke her guts out all over Itsuki's clothing.

"So how's it going with you?" a dissatisfied-looking Haruto asked Itsuki, who was currently focused on the PSP in his hands.

"...It's not. I can't get anyone to drop Muramasa. I'm starting to

wanna murder the developers.”

“I wasn’t talking about *Elminage*; I was talking about new story ideas.”

Itsuki frowned. “Even worse.”

“Yeah?” Haruto said, grinning at the terse reply.

“You know,” Nayuta suggested, “I could help take your mind off things, right on that bed over—”

“No thanks.” Itsuki nipped that in the bud.

“Okay, well, how about something else, then?” Haruto offered.

With a sigh, Itsuki picked himself up off the floor and placed his PSP on the table, apparently interested in the idea.

“...So you’re willing to listen to Prince Manwhore but not me?” the peeved-looking Nayuta whined.

Haruto thought for a moment. “Hmm... Well, how about a little mental exercise with Turtle Soup?”

““...!””

Itsuki’s and Nayuta’s faces wrinkled nervously.

“Dude... Are you serious...?”

“Wow, Prince Manwhore, you like turtles that much?”

“Mm? Well, if you think you can’t take me, we could always do something else.”

They both took the bait.

“Hell no! Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that I’ve never lost this game!”

“You better not get too cocky around *me*, Prince Manwhore!”

“Great, then. Also, I think you’re remembering wrong, Itsuki.”

“Turtle Soup” is a game that falls into the realm of lateral-thinking puzzles. This particular name is largely a Japanese invention, but the basic idea is akin to Twenty Questions—players ask a series of yes/no questions in an attempt to find the answer to a scenario posed by another player.

The classic Turtle Soup scenario goes along these lines: A man goes into a restaurant and orders turtle soup. After eating it, he calls for the chef and asks, “Is this really turtle soup?” “It is, sir,” the cook replies. Then the man leaves the restaurant and kills himself. Why did he do that? Players can then pose questions like “Did the man have any allergies?” or “Did the chef lie when he answered the question?” to try to reach the correct answer. If they do, they win the round.

It was a game commonly played by writers during parties and the like, since it required no tools to play. The Internet was packed with sample questions, and there were even a few published question-and-answer compilations. Itsuki and Haruto preferred to come up with original scenarios, putting limits on the number of yes/no questions to add to the competitive aspect.

A dishonest emcee could easily throw the game by posing a scenario that was impossible by design to figure out. Lodging these “bad stories” with unconvincing explanations, however, would expose the question poser to criticism like “Talk about amateur” or “Go back to the newbie contests” or “Your twisted sexual perversions are seeping into your scenarios” or “They should examine your brain to see why you had no shame about giving us such a shitty question.” All this character assassination could lead to a victorious round at the end but also a broken heart.

As a result, question posers were asked to strike a delicate balance—come up with a scenario that was impossible for the opponents to solve before they hit the question limit, but just barely so, and that *also* had a convincing backstory to it. It made Turtle Soup, in some ways, a trial by fire, where creators were forced to stake their good name for little in return.

“Okay,” Haruto said, “we’ll start with whoever thinks up a problem first. Fifteen questions per round. Ready...go!”

The three of them began to devise questions. Three minutes passed before Itsuki raised his hand first.

“Right, I think I came up with something.”

“You can come anytime you like, Itsuki...”

“Shut up, Nayuta!” Itsuki retorted before posing his question. “Okay, so a man gets married to this woman who’s, like, the sublime quintessence of trash, body and soul. She’s ugly, her personality’s awful, and there’s just nothing positive you can say about her at all. But the man lives with her his whole life without a single complaint. Why?”

“Is it because she’s his little sister?” “She’s his sister, isn’t she?”

Nayuta’s and Haruto’s replies came in stereo. This made Itsuki rear back in surprise.

“N-no way... You got it in one shot without any questions...? Are you guys reading my mind or something?!”

“...Well, it was a pretty shitty question to start with, but that phrase ‘sublime quintessence of trash’ sounded kinda inspired to me, so I’ll spare you too much humiliation.”

“Yeah, Itsuki’s scenarios are always garbage anyway.”

“Mm-hmm. Okay, I’ll go next.” Haruto took a deep breath. “A novelist is on deadline. He completely blows it apart. But the editor doesn’t lodge a single complaint—in fact, everyone in editorial thanks the author, from the bottom of their hearts. Why?”

“They thanked him?!”

Itsuki’s and Nayuta’s eyes opened wide. Both were no stranger to ignoring previously promised deadlines, and the rage from the editorial department each time was terrifying. Gratitude was

unthinkable.

“...Are you sure this isn’t just some hallucination of yours, Prince Manwhore?”

“Does that count as a question, Nayuta?”

Nayuta shook her head. “No, lemme try again: Are we talking about modern Japan?” Previous games had occasionally involved scenarios that unfolded in outer space or the Jomon period of Japan (circa 14,000 to 300 BC), so pinning down the setting was an integral strategy.

“Yes,” Haruto replied.

“No it’s not! Japan’s corrupt publishing industry keeps pushing to ‘stick to your deadlines, stick to your deadlines’ without giving a single crap about my problems! You’re dreaming, Haruto! You should know—you work for the same guys!”

“Well, I’ve never broken a deadline, so...”

“You haven’t? You listen to them? You traitor!”

“Why do you act so goody-goody around ’em like that, Prince Manwhore?”

“Why am I the bad guy here?” Haruto said, perplexed at their irrational outburst.

“Heh-heh-heh... What’s it gonna be? Either you stop respecting your deadlines, or you stop being our friend.”

“Pretty shitty friendship, if that’s how it is!”

“You’ve broken all those cherries, and you’ve never broken a deadline?”

“I’m not actually Prince Manwhore, you know!”

“C’mon, man, the more deadlines you fail to keep, the more the regret makes you a kinder, stronger person.”

“Oh, like you ever regretted blowing a schedule!”

“How are you supposed to break out of your shell if you can’t break out of the shackles of your deadlines?”

“The shackles...?!”

Despite how rash and thoughtless she was being, there was a mysteriously convincing aspect of Nayuta’s expertly woven argument. It threw Haruto for just a moment before he shook it off.

“Guys, stop trying to lure me down the path to Asshole Land! You’re supposed to be asking me questions!”

“Oh, right,” Itsuki growled. “Next question! ...Um, is this author someone’s little sister?”

“They might have some siblings, but let’s go with no. The writer’s background isn’t important.”

“No way... So it’s nobody’s sister, and the editors are still heaping praise on the guy for blowing a deadline...?”

“Could you stop wasting our questions, please?” Nayuta asked,

staring right at Itsuki.

“...Sorry,” he apologized honestly. “...But if the background isn’t important... It doesn’t matter if the author’s popular or on the brink of getting fired or whatever...? So maybe we should be focusing on the editors here.”

“Ooh, good idea!” Nayuta exclaimed.

“Maybe I gave out too much of a hint?” Haruto said, a bit concerned.

“Okay, so is the editorial department in some kind of crisis?” she ventured.

“Yes.”

“And if the writer blows this, would that save the editors from whatever danger this is?” Itsuki followed up.

“Yes.”

Itsuki and Nayuta visibly brightened. They were on a hot streak... which didn’t last long.

“...A problem you could solve by breaking a deadline... What could that be?”

“...Would the editors be in big trouble if the author’s novel ever got published?”

Haruto thought about Nayuta’s query for a bit. “I dunno...? Probably not, I guess?” he said, shrugging.

“That’s pretty vague... So the novel itself isn’t the issue?”

“Maybe the novel uses some characters from a theme park that’s really picky about its copyrights? Or, like, the publisher’s Shogakukan and the writer wrote about Dora—n...?”

“You’re blowing this way out of proportion, guys...”

The two of them mulled the question over a bit more before Itsuki spoke up.

“Wait... Haruto, can you repeat the question?”

“Okay. ‘This novelist has a deadline; he completely blows it apart, but the editor doesn’t mind at all. Everyone there thanks the author from the bottom of their hearts. Why?’”

“So this novel,” Itsuki began, far from confident. “Well, it could be a novel or a comic script or game text or whatever, but are we talking about blowing it *for the author’s own work*?”

“No,” Haruto said with a smile.

“...! Hmm... In that case...”

“Wait, wait?” Nayuta broke in. “He broke a deadline for something that wasn’t his? I don’t get it.”

Itsuki gave her a sidelong glance and plunged ahead. “Are you saying that the novelist *physically* blew something open?!”

“Yes!” Haruto nodded, the smile now an ironic grin.

“Physically? ...Oh!” Nayuta jumped a little in her seat. “Was the

author being kept in the editorial office until he broke it?"

"Yes... You pretty much got it now."

"At the time he broke it, were all the editors unconscious?"

"Well, all right, yes. Maybe they weren't, but they were all incapacitated."

Haruto shrugged again in a sign of defeat. Itsuki grinned in reply.

"...I got it. Here's what happened. All the windows and doors in the editorial office were closed and locked, and then a bunch of carbon monoxide was released inside. All the editors lost consciousness, but then the novelist stopped by, realized something was wrong, and kicked the door or window or whatever open, *completely blowing it apart*. Then he saves everyone, and they all love him for it! That's why you framed the word *deadline* and the term *blow it* in two different sentences. You weren't talking about blowing the deadline at all!"

"Ding, ding, ding. I had a backstory for why the office was being gassed, but it doesn't really matter. You win."

"Ah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! Questions like those are a total pushover for someone like me!"

Haruto warmly smiled as Itsuki laughed his high-pitched laugh and Nayuta gave him a round of applause.

"That was a pretty good problem by Prince Manwhore's standards, though, huh?" she observed.

"Yeah, thanks. You're up next, Nayu."

"All right. Wait'll you hear this one. It's gonna shock you so much, you'll have erectile dysfunction for the rest of your life."

It was an oddly threatening way to frame what turned out to be a pretty short question.

"So there's this man, and he made a jump. The man died. Why?"

""Huh?""

The other two answered her with slack-jawed stares.

"That's the whole problem? Clarification, not a question," said Haruto.

"If this winds up being the kind of crap we'd never solve in fifteen questions," Itsuki said, "you better get prepared for one severe tongue-lashing, girl."

"Sure, no problem."

Nayuta gave a confident nod at them both as they began working on the question.

"He made a jump and died? Did he jump off a building or mess up a ski jump or...? Well, did he die in a fall?"

"No."

"What?" Haruto exclaimed. "Is this kind of like my question, where it depends on how you interpret the word *jump*? Was the man

in debt?"

In Japanese financial parlance, someone who extended the period on their loan after paying nothing but interest on it was said to be "jumping" the loan. In other words, Haruto reasoned, the man might've had money issues. But Nayuta quickly disappointed him.

"I don't know. Let's go with no."

"It's not money... Um... Did someone else kill him?"

"No."

"Did the man have a little sister?!"

"I have no idea," Nayuta bluntly answered Itsuki.

"Please stop wasting questions on that...," Haruto pleaded. "Did the man fall from a really big height?"

"No."

"No? So it's not like the shock of falling gave him a heart attack halfway down, huh? It's someone who died jumping but not falling really far... Did he hang himself?"

"No."

"Did he die inside a room?"

"No."

"Did he die outdoors?"

"Not...outdoors, no."

"So not inside and not outside...? Did he die someplace dangerous?"

"Yes."

Despite all his questions, Haruto still struggled to find the crux of the query.

"...Are we in modern-day Japan here?" Itsuki asked out of the blue, recalling what Nayuta had asked Haruto a moment ago.

Nayuta's eyebrows twitched a little. "...No."

"It's *not* modern Japan? Is it some other country?"

"Yes. Probably."

"Probably...?"

"I mean, it's not that important, really, whether it's in Japan or not. Although I guess the location *is* kind of a key point..."

Haruto's eyes brightened.

"Is this taking place in reality?"

Nayuta took a moment to respond.

"...No."

"Ah-*haaaa*... I think I got it..." Haruto flashed a somewhat concerned-looking smile.

"What do you mean?" a still-oblivious Itsuki asked.

"...We're in the world of video games, aren't we?" Haruto pressed.

"...Yes," said Nayuta, and the edges of her lips curled upward.

"Is this the guy from *Spelunker*?"

“...Yeah,” the crestfallen Nayuta admitted.

“Nayu...,” Haruto began, a mix of relief and wry irony on his face. “I hate to say this, but I think that was a pretty shitty one. Way better than Itsuki’s, but...”

“Aww...”

“Huh? Um, a game?” Itsuki bumbled, still lost at sea.

“There’s this old action game called *Spelunker*,” Haruto explained. “You play this guy exploring a bunch of ruins so he can discover a bunch of treasure at the bottom. But the game got famous because your character’s, like, a total wimp, even weaker than any of us. He’ll die if a bat takes a shit on him or if he falls even a little less than his own height. If you make him jump off a cliff, he’ll die in midair before he even hits the ground.”

“...Oh, yeah, I think I saw a video of that on the Net once! It’s this game that’s notorious for being really crappy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“*Spelunker is not a crappy game!*”

Nayuta suddenly exploded, clearly peeved.

“I mean, all right, Mr. *Spelunker* tends to die a lot, but if you’re willing to accept that as the rules of the game, it’s never deliberately unfair to you. If you die, it’s like you always know that it was *your* fault you died, not the game’s! And now the game’s gotten all famous because of how wimpy you are, so people jump to the conclusion that it must be really bad, even though they’ve never played it. I hate that!”

“Oh...”

“Um...okay?”

It was rare for Nayuta to lose her temper like this. Rare enough that it gave both Haruto and Itsuki pause.

...Back when she had spent all her time cooped up at home, she had played a ton of free or cheap-to-download old games on the Internet, and she was still a fan of retro games today.

“Here, let me show you! We can play *Spelunker* right now!”

Seizing the momentum, Nayuta wound up purchasing *Spelunker* via Virtual Console on the nearby Wii system. The experience was eye opening to Haruto—“It’s hard, but if you’re careful, you can make it pretty far,” he admitted, “so I guess it’s not that unfair”—but Itsuki kept dying on the first few screens. “See?” he complained. “It really is crappy!”

This, however, created the kernel of an idea within Itsuki’s mind—a *Spelunker*-style little sister who keeps dying immediately. He writes a proposal posthaste, sends it to his editor, and has it rejected. Why?

☆PREVIOUS “TURTLE SOUP”
QUESTIONS FROM ITSUKI



Question:

A heroic fighter's taking on a dark demon lord. The demon's overwhelmingly powerful, and the hero's the only one left. But the fighter never gives up hope, and in the end, he manages to score a victory over the demon. Why?



Answer:

Because he had a little sister driving him to push through.



Question:

For breakfast, a man is presented with an awful-looking meal. It smells horrible, and it's barely recognizable as organic matter. But the man gleefully scarfs it down nonetheless. Why?



Answer:

Because his little sister made it for him.



Question:

A man is on his first overnight trip alone with the girl he loves. That night, the girl slips off her robe, blushes, and says “I’m ready” in a coquettish voice. But the man restrains his desires and says *[low, macho voice]*, “I don’t want to hurt you.” Why?



Answer:

Because the girl is his little sister.



Baring All

It was the end of January, and Miyako, free from her end-of-semester exams, was over at Itsuki's place.

"...Hey," he greeted her after she rang the doorbell.

"Oh, Itsuki! I, um, I wrapped up the last of my exams today, so I got a lot of free time! So I just thought I'd stop by and tell you! And, um, if there's anything you need me to do, I'm open to whatever, so..."

Her voice seemed to be speeding up midsentence as she blushed at him. Then she noticed what Itsuki was wearing. It made her do a dubious double take.

"Um, are you going somewhere?"

Itsuki had a coat and a scarf on, looking ready to leave at any moment, but he shook his head at Miyako anyway.

The explanation for this was provided by Nayuta's shouting from inside.

"Itsukiiii! Shut the doooooor! You're letting the wind inside!"

"Just come in," he prompted.

"Um, okay," Miyako meekly answered.

It was just as cold inside as out, with Nayuta lying half-covered by the blanket of the kotatsu table, dressed in as many layers as Itsuki and reading a manga magazine. "Congrats on finishing your exams, Myaa," she said, turning only her face to greet her.

"Thanks, Nayu. Man, it's kinda cold in here! Why don't you have the heat on?"

"...Because it broke this morning. It just had to be today, too... Brr," Itsuki said as he threw himself under the kotatsu with a shiver, taking a moment to glare at the air-conditioning unit above his head. "I'm deeply disappointed in you..."

"Did you call anyone about it?"

"Yeah, but they said they can't show up for three days. This kotatsu's keeping us from freezing to death, at least, but I can't do any work like this."

"Why don't you just go to the store and get a cheap room heater?"

"Mmm... Well, there's one other option left...", Nayuta said, sitting up and showing Itsuki an advertisement from his magazine.

“Itsuki, what about this?”

It was a two-page spread showing a group of swimsuit-clad beauties screaming “The beach!!!” in unison.

“...? You want us to go take the polar plunge somewhere in this weather?”

“No! This manga’s set around a school trip in Okinawa.”

“Okinawa...! We could do that!”

“We could, yes!”

Seeing Itsuki and Nayuta relate to each other over this unnerved Miyako a bit. “Wait a sec, guys,” she interjected. “What are you suggesting? I mean, I guess Okinawa’s warm during the winter, but you aren’t gonna go fly there right now, are you?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Itsuki instantly agreed.

“You should come along with us, Myaa!”

“Huh? Me?!”

“You just finished up your tests, right? I could pay for your ticket!”

“Whoa, Nayuta, I couldn’t... I mean, money wouldn’t be the issue, so...”

“Great, so we’re all set! Me, you, and Itsuki in Okinawa!”

“We’re what? Already? Huhh?!”

Faced with Nayuta’s supremely joyful grin, Miyako found it impossible to say no.

And thus, that was that.



It being the off-season, securing plane tickets and hotel reservations turned out to be the easy part. All three of them were on the island of Okinawa by nightfall.

“I can’t believe we’re really here... I mean...is Okinawa really the kind of place you just zoom off to because it feels a little nippy out?” Miyako whispered as they walked down the airport hallway, carrying only a small bag with her.

“Hah-hah-hah! I’m finally back home, Okinawa!” Itsuki bellowed, twirling his long black coat like a medieval cape.

“Huh? Were you born here?”

“...No. But I did visit around two years ago.”

“Oh. Where did you go then?”

“To the hotel.”

“Well, yeah, but what kind of sightseeing did you do? Any activities?”

“No, nothing, really.”

“Um...”

“It was August, so everything was friggin’ packed with tourists, and the sun was so hot I felt like I was melting. So I wound up spending all three days in the hotel.”

“Wow, are you an idiot?”

Itsuki blushed at Miyako’s frank and honest impression. “What do you mean, ‘an idiot’? It’s my vacation! I can do whatever I want!”

“Sure, but...that is stupid, you know.”

“N-no it’s not... You’re stupid for thinking it’s stupid...”

Itsuki himself regretted the memory of that trip enough that not even he bothered to put up a vigorous defense.

“...Th-this time, though, I’m gonna learn from the past and take in everything Okinawa’s got to offer! ...Sure is hot, though. I’m startin’ to not wanna go outside.”

“True... I can’t believe this is January,” Nayuta said, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“They said it’s in the low sixties here,” Miyako added. “That’s Okinawa for you...always warm... You know, guys, maybe you wouldn’t be so hot if you took off a layer or two.”

“Oh, right!”

“Good point.”

They took off their coats, only to reveal knit sweaters underneath. They wound up buying T-shirts and underwear at the souvenir shop before taking a taxi to their hotel in Okinawa’s capital city of Naha. Itsuki took up a single room, while Miyako and Nayuta shared one with two beds.

“Hey, Myaa, you wanna trade rooms with Itsuki?”

“No! We can’t do that!”

“Aww... I look forward to staying with you, though, Myaa.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Miyako said, patting the smiling, undulating Nayuta on the head.

After quickly freshening up in their rooms, the trio headed to a nearby *izakaya* for dinner. This was Okinawa, after all, and a ton of local cuisine was served family-style—taco rice (Tex-Mex-style seasoned beef over rice), *goya champuru* (bitter melon stir-fry with pork or Spam), *rafute* (pork ribs), sea grapes (a type of edible tropical seaweed), and fried *gurukun* (the most common fish in Okinawa), one of the island’s most well-known saltwater fish species.

Itsuki and Miyako toasted the meal over a couple of jugs of beer seasoned with hibiscus extract. The light, refreshing sweet-and-sour flavor couldn’t be beat in hot weather. (This extract is available on the Net, allowing you to create your own anytime you’d like. It’s best mixed into lighter varieties, such as a nice Belgian white or Okinawa’s hometown Orion beer.) Nayuta, not quite being the legal age to drink

yet, had to make do with hibiscus juice instead.

“...Mm. This is nice.”

“Yeah. It goes great with the goya champuru.”

Nayuta puffed her cheeks out at the sight of Itsuki and Miyako savoring all the flavors they were taking in.

“Aw, I want some, too...”

“Nope. Wait until you’re twenty years old.”

“Yeah,” Itsuki added, “just enjoy your little-kid juice for now.”

“...Is that why you won’t look at me as a romantic partner, Itsuki? Because I’m not of drinking age?”

“Bpph!!” Itsuki spat out the beer in his mouth. As he furiously wiped the table and his mouth with a washcloth, he added, “Um, what was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“...Isn’t it a lot more painful to pretend you didn’t hear me after that insane overreaction? So am I too young to be of any romantic interest to you, Itsuki, or not?” Nayuta said, staring at the barefaced liar before her.

“Oh, did you say something? Geez, they’ve got the music up so loud in this place, you can barely hear anything.” Itsuki kept up the wooden-doll act as Nayuta doggedly pursued the issue.

“I need you, Itsuki.”

“You need a Jew? Sorry, I’m not that religious.”

“We’re driven together by destiny.”

“Oh, did you buy a car?”

“Let’s have sex.”

“Mmm, I like the trumpet more than the sax, myself.”

“...Now I’m wondering how long you can keep this going. You can cop a feel whenever you like, y’know.”

“Cop? Did someone commit a crime?”

“Fuck me now!”

“Hockey? On a tropical island? Yeah, right.”

“...This is getting painful.”

“And you’re kinda stretching the definition of romantic confessions.”

“I want your cummies!”

“E. E. Cummings? Boy, some of his poems were pretty off the wall, weren’t they? And that’s still not an admission of love.”

“...Okay, let’s class it up a little. It’s a beautiful moon, isn’t it?”

“It sure is.”

“Huh? Um, that was the way that Natsume Soseki translated—”

“I know! I was just stringing you along!”

It was how the great author Soseki had famously translated the English term *I love you* into Japanese, his reasoning being that the term *love* didn’t have a direct counterpart in the rarefied literary

language of nineteenth-century Japan.

“Well, I adore you for it, Itsuki.”

“.....A durian? Nah, those things smell... Hey, can we knock this off? It’s starting to tire me out.”

“Sure, if you let me have some beer.”

“Go suck on an egg, kid,” Itsuki replied, stabbing at one of the full-size boiled eggs by the rafute with his chopsticks and offering it to her. With a soft “Glom,” she took the whole thing into her mouth, chopsticks and all.

“Mpph...mmm...psshht...”

“Would you stop licking your lips like that?”

He took the sticks out of Nayuta’s mouth while she clearly made a spectacle out of licking her chops as loudly and moistly as possible. The edge of one chopstick was connected to her lips by a low-arching line of spittle.

“Wow, Itsuki. Planting one of your balls right in front of my face? Maybe you are a little too kinky for me.”

“Would you cut it out with the lewd phrasing?”

Cheeks ablush, Itsuki refocused on his dinner as Nayuta grabbed one of the fried fish bits with her own chopsticks.

...And as they were tossing bon mots at each other, Miyako was in a miniature panic, eyes darting back and forth between the two, wondering when—or if—she should finally intervene.



Back at the hotel, Itsuki turned on his laptop and got to work. He’d had only one round of beer, so he wasn’t drunk enough to be knocked out for the night, and the filling tropical meal and gentle evening breeze through the window—in January, no less—did more than enough to refresh his mind. Work proceeded quickly as a result. It almost made Itsuki consider wintering in Okinawa from now on, before he finally got tired out after almost two hours.

Just as he considered turning in, there was a knock on the door. He opened it to find Miyako on the other side. Her hair was a little wet, and she had a FamilyMart convenience store bag in her hand.

“They had all kinds of booze I’d never seen before,” she said, “so I bought some. Wanna join me?” Her eyes were a bit glazed over, her cheeks flushed, and her voice oddly bright for this late in the evening, convincing Itsuki that she had gotten a head start.

“...Where’s Kanikou?”

“Nayu took a bath and went straight to bed.”

“Oh.”

Inviting herself into the room, Miyako took a few cans out of the bag and lined them up on the table. From the Nangoku Chuhai to the Orion Southern Star and Special X beers, Itsuki hadn't seen any of the brand names over on Japan's main island.

"The convenience stores in Okinawa are crazy! They sell taco-rice bentos and rice balls with pork meatballs inside them—and, like, limited-time burgers and snacks and stuff. And they were selling soba noodles in the *oden* food display, too. Oh, and tons of regional juice and stuff in the vending machines!"

"Yeah, I know. I got all my meals out of the convenience store last time I was here."

"Wow, can't say I can praise you for that," a stunned Miyako replied as she pulled the tab on the Southern Star and began sipping it. Itsuki, for his part, was tackling the *shequasar*-and-pine-flavored Nangoku Chuhai, another Okinawa-exclusive flavor combo. He hadn't had anything to drink while writing, so he realized for the first time that he was pretty thirsty.

"How is that?"

"Oh, not bad," he replied after glugging it down to quench his thirst.

"Yeah? I guess this is just okay. Wish I had some of that hibiscus extract to pour in it."

The two of them continued chatting as they turned to their second cans, Miyako unsure which one to go with.

"Hey, Itsuki?"

"Mm?"

"What do you think about Nayu, anyway?"

"She's a pervert," he immediately replied.

"Yeah, um... Well, yeah, I guess so! But being told she loves you all the time like that... I mean, have you ever thought about going out with her, a little?"

"...Think about it, huh...? I already turned her down. Like, ages ago."

Thanks to the alcohol, Itsuki was having a bit of trouble focusing his eyes.

"R-really? When?!"

"..."

He opened the Special X and took a swig, letting out a quick burp that sounded oddly cute to Miyako along the way.

He explained to her that Nayuta had come back to his apartment three days after her first visit to ask what he thought of her debut work and of her love confession. Apparently, he replied, "I can't be that way with you," and that was that. Nayuta burst into tears on the spot, and Itsuki, as he put it, still recalled what an ass he felt like,

watching her fall to her knees and cry in his apartment. Even if it wasn't particularly his fault, he felt completely worthless, unable to do anything to help.

When Nayuta turned to leave, head hung down low, he heard her whisper, "...Will you still talk to me, Mr. Hashima?" Itsuki was so racked with guilt that he hesitantly said, "S-sure, of course. I mean... I'd always love to have another novelist friend or two."

...He didn't expect that would mean Nayuta would visit his apartment again the very next day.

Still, after just claiming he'd "love" to have another friend, he found it a bit too cruel to summarily kick her out. So he invited her in, and they started playing some game or another together. Then she visited again and again, which brought them to their current relationship.

"Ohhhh..."

"...Ohhhh' what?"

"Mm. I just felt kind of guilty. All this time, I had pictured you as this bastard who kept dodging any actual commitment with this cute girl hanging around you but giving her just enough positive reinforcement so she stuck around."

"...You did?" Itsuki gave her a bleary glare.

She grinned apologetically. "Why don't you two just become a couple? I mean, she's cute, and—wait. Never mind. I take that back."

"?"

Miyako took her eyes off the perplexed Itsuki.

Why aren't you a couple?

She remembered one of her friends asking her the same question multiple times and how it had always put her on the spot. It wasn't as if she minded hanging with people she didn't like just because they were handsome or smart or captain of the soccer team or rich or had a bright future ahead of them or whatever. Maybe she'd start to like him over time if she kept it up. It's just that people kept assuming that they'd get together—that it'd be weird if they didn't—and Miyako resented that.

"...So you really don't think anything about her?" she ventured again.

"Well, that's a stupid question." Itsuki turned his face away from her. "...I don't think *nothing* about her, no. And that's what makes this so shitty."

Seeing his shockingly reddened profile almost made Miyako want to cry on the spot.

"...Have you ever read Kanikou's books, Miyako?" he whispered, eyes still downturned.

"...No," she replied.

“...You should, as long as you have no writing aspirations for the future. If you don’t, you’re seriously losing out. You had the free time to read my stuff; you should really devote it to Nayuta Kani’s instead...”

He delivered it almost like a monologue, then capped it off by falling to his side and instantly starting to snore. Hearing this unfamiliar, amazingly unarrogant side of Itsuki came as a shock to Miyako.

“...Guess you got a lot on your plate, too...”



The next morning, the three of them were discussing the day’s itinerary over breakfast at the hotel restaurant.

“This is our first trip to Okinawa,” Miyako began, “so we gotta hit up Shuri Castle and the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium. Beyond that, you guys got any recommendations for the island in the winter? Anything you wanna do?”

“Um...”

“Meww?”

The responses from Itsuki and Nayuta, both of their eyelids still heavy from fatigue, were rather sluggish as they chewed on their grilled fish.

“I said, do you have any place you wanna go?”

“...Ooh, not so loud. It’s ringing in my head...” Itsuki winced.

“What, are you hungover?”

“...Don’t be stupid... Who gets hungover after a single can of beer...?”

“One can...? Do you even remember what you did last night?”

“Um... I was writing late at night, and I must’ve dozed off sometime...”

Miyako sighed at Itsuki. He really didn’t remember. And she wasn’t much in the mood to clue him in. After their deep conversation, she’d spent a while longer drinking as she’d enjoyed the sight of Itsuki sleeping like a baby. It’d be a little weird if that got out.

“So you wanna go somewhere, or what?”

“Mmngh... Desert island.”

Miyako raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“...In the next volume, I have this event where the hero and his little sister get marooned on a desert island. I wanted to get some material.”

“Hmm... Well, maybe there’s an uninhabited island we can check out nearby. I’ll do some research.”

And so, just a bit after noon, the three of them arrived at one of Okinawa's outlying islands.

Chatting with the hotel staff and a guy who worked at the place where they had lunch, Miyako had tracked down an island that, at this time of year, was unlikely to have anyone on it.

"Thank God we have Myaa with us, huh, Itsuki?" Nayuta chirped.

"...Yeah," Itsuki replied.

When it came to hotels, flight reservations, and other things he could buy as part of a prearranged system, Itsuki could handle that, no problem. Actually talking to live human beings and getting info out of them, meanwhile, was an ordeal. Having Miyako and her superior communication skills handle that was a godsend for him.

Just as her contacts had suggested, there were no tourists on the island today besides the three of them. It was a small one, too. They had been walking down a narrow path, snapping pictures on their phones, and all too soon they were on the opposite beach from where they'd started, the blue ocean spread before them.

"Wow...", Miyako sighed.

"Iiiiit's beach time!" Nayuta intoned as if they were in a poorly acted anime scene, flipping off her shoes and mincing her way across the sand.

"Ooh, it's cold! Guess I should've expected that." Miyako joined her, removing her shoes and planting her feet into the crystal-clear waters.

"We should swim in it anyway, Myaa! We're here and all!"

"What are you, crazy? We don't have any swimsuits."

"What do we need those for?" countered Nayuta calmly. "There's nobody heeere..."

"Huh?" Miyako blankly asked as Nayuta began to wriggle out of her T-shirt. "Whoa! What're you doing, Nayuta? Itsuki, look away!"

"Y-yeah, I know!"

He had reflexively turned around, not needing what Nayuta was doing spelled out for him. Without a moment's hesitation, Nayuta had her shirt and skirt off, flinging her panties into the air before falling straight into the water, not a stitch on her.

The way she shouted "Splassssh!" only added to the bizarreness. Some of the resulting spray landed on Miyako's clothing.

"Hey! Come on! Put your clothes on!"

"It's so cold, Myaa!" Nayuta opened her eyes wide, as if this came as a surprise to her.

"Of course it is!"

"I, um, I think it's fine, though. You come in, too, Myaa!"

Nayuta stood up and began splashing more water in Miyako's

direction. Every time she swung her arms, she drummed up some remarkably wide-ranging sprays, considering her small size.

“Agh, that’s cold! You’re getting me wet!”

“C’mon! You too, Itsuki!”

“You dumbass!” Itsuki shouted as he ran off, taking pains not to turn toward Nayuta.

“Knock it off, Nayuta!”

“We were in the same public bath together last night, Myaa!”

“So what?!”

In the waters, which were painted a dazzling array of sparkling colors by the sun, the way Nayuta spun her silver hair and pale limbs around in her torrents of water made her look like some kind of demented water spirit. It was even starting to make Miyako’s heart race, despite her preference for the opposite sex. It was a portal to an alien world out there in the sea, and if she waded in there, too, she might just become part of the fantasy realm unfolding inside.

It was oddly exciting. Oddly irresistible. She had to follow those emotions.

“Ughh! Itsuki! You keep an eye on the beach! You peek, and I’ll break your collarbone!”

Without waiting for a reply, Miyako tore off her clothes and followed Nayuta into the sea. She ran as if she were trying to traverse the water’s surface, shrieking “Ahhh, it’s colldd!!” all the while.

“Over here, Myaa.”

“All right! You happy now?!”

“Nyaaah!”

Nayuta splashed more water her way, enjoying every moment. Miyako fought back.

“Oh Godddd, what am I even doooing?!”

Even this far south, the sea in January wasn’t exactly warm. Going into it buck naked really was pretty stupid. *I’m doing something right now I wouldn’t even dream of doing. If my college friends saw me, what would they even think?*

“Nya-hah-hah!”

And this girl in front of her, carrying on like a child, hanging around her and giving her affection as if they were sisters, was apparently this genius-level writer who made Itsuki Hashima—someone Miyako already found impressive—say de facto “forget about me” by comparison.

Ever since she’d met Itsuki, she had fallen into the habit of reading novels, making occasional inroads into manga, games, and anime as well, but Nayuta Kani’s work was still unfamiliar to Miyako. She had avoided it, in fact. She had the vague impression that somehow, if she read her stuff, she wouldn’t be able to interact with

Nayuta the way she did now.

But the *Landscape* series was enough of a bestseller that most bookstores gave it prominent positioning. Whenever Miyako ordered a book on Amazon, Nayuta's stuff would show up high in the "Customers who bought this item also bought" section all the time. She couldn't help but notice it. Every volume of hers had several hundred reviews, most of them fawning—almost into the realm of worship sometimes, with people claiming this book "changed [their] life" or "saved" them.

It made Miyako wonder, *Have I ever changed someone's life? Or saved them?*

As the guy on the 10,000-yen bill wrote, "It is said that heaven does not create one man above or below another man. But that doesn't, like, mean everybody's equal in real life, either."

That made sense to Miyako. People aren't equal. Nayuta Kani was more valuable than her. And she was less valuable than Nayuta Kani. And, she thought, someone like herself had no right to interfere in her love affairs.

The tears came rolling down. They were quickly washed away by the plumes of water Nayuta was splashing at her, impossible to notice.

Meanwhile...

"I'm the one who should be saying that. What am I even doing?"

Itsuki was seated behind a boulder and staring at the sky. Two naked women were shouting at each other just on the other side of it. If someone asked whether he wanted to look or not—hell yeah, he wanted to look. And he probably wouldn't get caught, either, if he peeked out from behind the crag.

But Itsuki boldly resisted the urge. He was here on this desert island for research purposes. The captain of the boat they'd taken had warned him to watch for poisonous vipers, so he couldn't go exploring by himself. Vipers sounded scary.

"Talk about a snake in the grass..."

And as time continued to crawl, second after anguishing second, he couldn't help but wish he had been smart enough to bring his computer along.



After taking the boat back to Okinawa's main island, they toured Shuri Castle and bumped around International Avenue, Naha's largest thoroughfare, picking up some souvenirs as they did.

They spent most of their second full day at the Churaumi

Aquarium, gawking at the whale sharks, then had a fast-food dinner at A&W. The four root-beer refills Nayuta enjoyed there laid so much waste to her GI tract that they almost missed their flight back home.

But make it back to Tokyo they did, later that night, although they almost froze their asses off all over again returning home before snuggling back around the kotatsu. The HVAC guy came to fix the system the next day, and then everything was back to normal.

Itsuki had dug the whale sharks so much—even buying a bunch of cheap merchandise at the aquarium before he'd left—that he quickly whipped up a new book proposal centered around the tale of a little sister who lived naked on a desert island with her brother, who was cursed and turned into a whale shark.

“Hey,” his editor Toki said, “that might actually work. Kind of a fairy-tale fantasy love story. It could be a new Itsuki Hashima frontier to explore.” But he rejected it anyway. Itsuki was adamant that the man must be doomed to be a whale shark forever and united with his sister underneath the churning waters, and Toki just couldn't wrap his head around the feel-good climax.

BOOK PROPOSAL **MY BROTHER, THE WHALE SHARK** (tent.)

CONCEPT

The romantic seaside love story between a girl and a whale shark.

CHARACTERS

Jin Samejima

The hero, aged seventeen. A boy who was cursed and turned into a whale shark. He laments his new body, unable to do anything except filter plankton and seaweed through his mouth. Forty-nine feet in length.

Meru Samejima

The heroine and Jin's sister, aged fifteen. She lives on a deserted island with her whale-shark brother, spending her time completely in the nude so Jin won't be distressed by his own inability to wear clothing. Gifted in archery and spear throwing, she hunts the island's wildlife for sustenance and researches sorcery to attempt to undo the curse.

Alba Albatross

The sorcerer who transformed Jin into a whale shark. He fell in love with Meru Samejima at first sight upon courting her at a party aboard a fancy yacht, only to be summarily turned down. He then attempted to place a curse upon her as revenge, only to have Jin jump in front of her at the last minute.

Geese Okita

A master shark hunter seeking to harpoon Jin. As they wage epic battles against each other, he slowly begins to foster a friendship with his quarry.

Megalodon

The sub-heroine, a megalodon shark summoned from prehistoric times by Alba. Forty-nine feet in length, she is female and has one older brother. Following an extended, frenetic undersea battle with Jin, she starts to see traces of her own brother in him. This kindles fleeting feelings of love within her, although she resists them to the point that she acts rudely toward Jin.

Synopsis

Jin Samejima, a boy transformed into a whale shark by a curse from the sorcerer Alba. Lives on a deserted island with his little sister, Meru. Alba doggedly chases after Jin, refusing to give up his own love for Meru. He sends Geese the shark hunter, a megalodon from the past, and other assassins to kill Jin. After a life-or-death struggle, the two siblings manage to defeat Alba only to find that not even this can undo the curse. Their love, however, transcends all species boundaries, and soon they are united forever: "...You don't mind my rough shark skin?" "Never, my love..."

THE END!

Gods

It probably doesn't need to be said, but the stories Itsuki Hashima, Haruto Fuwa, and Nayuta Kani wrote all fell under the genre of "light novels."

The term has become widely known in recent years, but even now, it lacks any sort of concrete definition, despite all the (pointless) arguing people have done over it. That's because no matter what rubric you attempt to use to classify them—by content, by packaging, by writing style, by author, by publisher, by target audience, by genre, by characters, and so on and so on—it's too easy to come up with several examples that defy the rules.

The series *Light Novel Club* includes a section where the hero, Misaki Asaba, provides a few sample books generally perceived as light novels, more or less, and says, "Yeah, those are light novels, I guess." Just like her, people in real life are forced to make these vague judgments, with no solid definition to rely upon. She was doing the best job she could, really.

So let's try taking Asaba's approach. A "light novel" is the sort of novel published by prestigious, leading Japanese light novel publishers like our very own **Shogakukan Gagaga Bunko**, featuring (usually) anime- or manga-style art on the cover. That, in a very lazy, hazy sort of way, sums it up.

Packaging, it turns out, is vitally important for almost any product, not just books. It refers to almost anything that attracts the customer's attention and drives them to make a purchase—in a book's case, the cover, the title, the obi description, and the blurb on the back or the side flaps.

For a light novel, the most important thing of all—the pillars that keep the whole package upright—is the illustrations (with some exceptions). No matter how charming the characters, no matter how much the story grabs you by the heart and doesn't let go, nobody's going to notice if they never pick the book up in the first place.

The industry isn't so easy to profit in that a decent package means a bestseller 100 percent of the time, but the fact of it is, if you don't have a good package, nobody will read it. You can't even throw your hat in the ring, so to speak. This fact isn't necessarily restricted to

light novels, either—nearly anyone involved with product development has encountered it one time or another.

So to light novel writers like Itsuki and his cohorts, the illustrators handling their books were a vital part of their continued relevance in this field. Sort of **gods** in their midst. And the world of artists was polytheistic; there might be Zeus-types with omnipotent skills, gods you couldn't really rely on much, gods with tons of ability but not much in the way of stability, even **accursed gods** who caused problems and (on rare occasions) actively damaged their books, authors, and publishers. Generally, however, they were considered holy presences, worthy of great honor and respect.

Itsuki was, right now, playing with one of these gods. Setsuna Ena, to be exact, a young man sitting across the kotatsu from him. He had a mischievous, puppy-dog-like face and a body about as diminutive and thin as Itsuki's. His hair was dyed a trifacta of colors, mostly blue, and his clothing was frilly, colorful, and unique—the “Harajuku style,” as some people called it.

At the age of sixteen, he was an intensely popular artist, working on titles like *Genesis Sisters of the New World* (Itsuki's second series) under the handle “Puriketsu,” which literally meant “Jiggly Ass.” He was great at drawing cute girls, and he had an inimitable knack for drawing asses with the perfect amount of jiggle.

Volume 1 of *Genesis Sisters of the New World* remained Itsuki's most reprinted individual release, and it wouldn't be going too far to say that Itsuki had punched his ticket into the Bestselling Authors Fun Club thanks to Setsuna over here. And for some reason, this god among men had taken a shining to both Itsuki's work and Itsuki himself, hanging out at his place even though *Genesis Sisters* had long wrapped up.

“Thirty-seven points,” Itsuki said, reading his score after the game ended.

“Dah, I'm thirty-five. Close! All I needed was one more sheep!”

“Hah-hah-hah! It's talent, man, talent! Bah-hah-hah-hah-hah!”

Itsuki was nothing if not a sore winner.

They were playing a game called *Agricola: All Creatures Big and Small*, a special version of the Euro-style board game *Agricola*, tweaked for two players only, rather than the original's two to five. In Japan it had earned the nickname *Futaricola*, a portmanteau of *Agricola* and *futari*, or “two people.”

Each player took the role of a farming couple tasked with building their household's facilities and expanding their count of livestock. Whichever player had the more bountiful farm after eight turns was the winner.

The main difference between *Futaricola* and its predecessor was

that it had no luck-based elements, no dice to roll or cards to draw from a pile. It was, to use technical terms, a “two-player, zero-sum, logically perfect information game,” akin to Go, chess, reversi, and so on. Games without luck elements were at their most exciting when played by people of roughly equal skills, and Setsuna and Itsuki were perfectly matched in that way.

“Boy, it sure is exciting to play Futaricola with you, sir! Want another game?”



Itsuki shook his head at Setsuna's cheerful request.

"I gotta come up with a new proposal by the end of today."

"Aww," Setsuna replied, pouting. It made him look even more puppy-dog-like.

"Don't 'aww' at me. You're the one who came in without any notice."

Setsuna rarely provided any. He didn't have any cell phone at all, smart or dumb, so the only way to reach him was by e-mail on his PC or by calling him on his home's landline. He was often out of the house, almost never checked his mail, and didn't bother picking up the line when he was drawing, making communication exceedingly difficult. This had put a tremendous strain on things during work on *Genesis Sisters of the New World*—particularly on their editor Kenjiro Toki, who developed a stomach ulcer midway through.

"Ah, what's the big deal, sir? You're practically home all the time anyway."

"Hah-hah-hah! You fool! I was over in Okinawa until the day before yesterday!"

"Whoa, really? Cool! I'm impressed."

"Heh-heh! Jealous, huh? ...Here's something for you."

Itsuki took out a box of *chinsuko*, a traditional biscuit sold for people to bring home from Okinawa, and handed it to Setsuna.

"Wow, thanks! Did you have fun down there?"

"Yep. I saw a whale shark."

"Oh, I've heard of them! Like, really huge, right?"

"Yeah, it was gigantic. Up close in person, it's totally crazy. Something that huge just makes you melt on the spot."

"Yeah? Hey, isn't that a whale-shark strap on your phone case?" The sharp-eyed Setsuna spotted the charm dangling from Itsuki's phone. "You must really like 'em, huh?"

"Uh-huh. I wanted to put one in my next story, too."

"Whoa, really?"

"...Until my lame-ass editor rejected it."

"Whoa, really? What was it about?"

Itsuki recapped the general gist—the tale of a whale shark and his nudist human sister.

"Holy crap! That's awesome, sir!"

"Heh-heh-heh! Yeah, ain't it?"

He couldn't help but laugh at how honestly impressed Setsuna seemed.

"But how's a fish gonna have sex with a girl? I saw this documentary on TV that showed salmon laying eggs, but first the female lays the eggs, and then the dude blows his load all over them!"

“No problem there. Sharks actually fertilize their eggs inside the female’s body, unlike most fish. They’ve got genitals for it and everything.”

“Whoa, really? Sharks have dicks?”

“Mm-hmm. That’s why the climax was gonna be so awesome. The story and setting work in perfect harmony, and it only works because the hero’s a shark! And my asshole editor didn’t understand a damn word of it!”

“Here, lemme try drawing that!” Setsuna shouted, whipping out his sketchbook and a mechanical pencil.

“Draw what?”

Before Itsuki’s astonished eyes, Setsuna was sketching out an illustration at a blazing speed.

“Is that...?”

He was drawing, essentially, what Itsuki had just described—a scene depicting a whale shark in natural unity with a beautiful girl under the sea.

“Here! Kinda like this!”

The naked woman on the unruled sheet was impaled by something sprouting out of the shark’s lower body, a look of bliss upon her face. From afar, it merely looked as if she was swimming alongside the beast, but the entire piece of artwork reeked of obscenity nonetheless. It left an otherworldly, fantasy-like impression, as if the observer were himself floating in the warm tropical blue waters, marveling at the girl’s jiggly bubble butt from up close.

Despite being drawn with nothing but a mechanical pencil, it was already high-quality enough to serve as an in-the-book illustration. It was so good, Itsuki honestly felt Toki would change his mind and give him the green light if they showed this to him. He had to pause for a moment to observe, to take it all in. It was all there—the moving climax, the picture in his mind he was trying to express with this novel. Even better than anything he’d pictured.

“Boy, I could go for some *ikura* sushi right now!” Setsuna observed, apropos of nothing.

“Sushi?” Itsuki parroted, not following him.

“We were just talking about salmon, remember? Now I’m kinda hungry for some!”

“...Why don’t you go out and do that, then?”

“You oughta come with, sir!”

“...Well, if you want.” Itsuki nodded, not thinking much about it.



It was past sundown by the time Itsuki and Setsuna arrived in **Hokkaido**.

“How did this happen...?” Itsuki groaned as he set foot in New Chitose Airport, the expression on his face reminiscent of Miyako’s when she’d arrived in Okinawa.

He’d been expecting to head for some nearby sushi joint with Setsuna for their *ikura* salmon-roe feast, but then he’d started cajoling him further. “If we’re gonna go out,” he’d said, “we might as well eat some really awesome salmon, sir! And nobody does salmon better than Hokkaido!”

Itsuki agreed, still revved up from his previous trip. “I was just in Okinawa two days ago,” he reasoned as he made the plane and hotel reservations. “Might as well cover the northern tip of Japan, too!” The arrangements were a little trickier this time, with the enormous Sapporo Snow Festival in full swing, but it all fell into place anyway. “Might as well,” indeed.

And despite traveling to Hokkaido in search of salmon caviar, Setsuna kicked off the trip by chowing down on a bowl of miso ramen at an airport restaurant. “Hey, I was hungry!” he protested, grinning. “If you’re in Hokkaido, you gotta try out the ramen, sir!”

You could’ve gone for something with actual seafood in it, Itsuki thought, but his own ramen was too delicious to get too worked up about it. This was his first time on Japan’s northern island, so he figured he should enjoy the ride.

So they hopped on a train to their hotel in Sapporo. Then, when they left Sapporo Station, they noticed something: the cold and the howling wind.

“G-geez, I’m freezing...! This is nuts! How can people live in this?! I’m going home!”

There was a light blizzard going on as Itsuki shivered, making it hard to assess his surroundings. Setsuna was even more lightly dressed than he was, but he remained chipper, singing “Winter, Again” from pop group GLAY as he traipsed along the sidewalk.

“Hm hmm hmmm, hmmm hm hmm hmm hmmm hm hmmm... ♪”

He was actually singing the lyrics (and he was good, too), but our publisher didn’t want to pay the licensing fees.

“Singing about taking your girlfriend up to Hokkaido in the winter... Takuro must be some kind of sadist... You know where the hotel is?”

Setsuna gave Itsuki a blank stare. “Huh? Wasn’t it pretty much this way?”

“.....Give me a sec.” Itsuki looked the hotel up on his phone. “... We’re going the complete opposite direction, dumbass! Dahhh!

Hmmm, hmm hmm hmmm...”

Itsuki was so troubled by this turn of events that he began singing T.M.Revolution’s “White Breath” (the lyrics, again, are left to the imagination) as he followed his phone’s screen to the hotel.



The next morning was kicked off at a restaurant, where the two of them each ordered rather opulent bowls of sashimi served over rice. They were practically overflowing with sea urchin, salmon roe, and crab legs, with piles of northern shrimp and scallops enshrined upon the apex. There were clearly far more toppings than actual rice.

“This is way too much!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I’ve never seen anything like this!”

The two were shocked and delighted at the meal. Once they actually finished eating it, though, Itsuki moaned, “I think I’m done with sea urchin and roe for a while...”

“Yeah,” Setsuna drowsily agreed. “I had no idea too much of that could actually make you sick...”

“...You know, I never understood why they included the ginger and the *shiso* leaves at the top of these bowls, but now I do. I need some vegetables, bad...”

Either way, they had set out to eat salmon roe, and salmon roe was eaten. They had reserved the hotel for only one night, and their flight back was that afternoon, so they checked out, traveled right back to the airport, shopped a little in the terminal, and ate some *jingisukan* for lunch—mutton grilled in a skillet, a popular meal in Hokkaido.

On their way to the flight check-in desk, Setsuna stopped in front of a poster for the Sapporo Snow Festival.

“Hey, sir, I’m gonna stay here for another week or so.”

“Um, what’d you say?”

“Y’know, I’m here and all! I figured I oughta go see the Snow Festival, too.”

“That’s kind of rash, isn’t it?”

“You wanna come with, sir?”

“No way. Too cold. And all those crowds!”

“Oh yeah? Okay, well, I gotta go cancel my flight, so see ya later! An’ thanks for the *chinsuko*!”

“Uh, sure?”

Itsuki smiled distractedly as he waved at the departing Setsuna, his mind still a blank.

“He just goes where the wind takes him, huh...?”

With no other great ideas, Itsuki boarded the jet by himself, went back to Tokyo, made it back to his apartment, turned on the heat, and sat by his kotatsu. Setsuna's drawing of the sex scene with the girl and the whale shark was still on the table. He stared at it for a while.

Packaging could refer to an entire range of things. A single outstanding aspect wouldn't be enough to make a product sell; nor would a single inferior aspect doom it to failure. The art was the most important piece of a light novel's packaging, but even the greatest art in the world might not be a good match for readers' tastes. It could clash with the cover logo or obi's design or give too complex an impression to work within the confines of a paperback's size. A high-quality work of art wasn't necessarily the same thing as a high-quality cover illustration.

On extremely rare occasions, however, the stars would align, and you would come across a piece of art that singularly, overwhelmingly caught the eye. It would work on a level beyond individual readers' tastes or juxtaposition with the other elements. It would shine bright, even if it wasn't optimized for paperback sizes, and it would all but force people's eyes to gaze upon it.

No doubt about it. That was exactly what Setsuna Ena had come up with.

About a year and a half ago, when the *Genesis Sisters of the New World* series wrapped and it was time to launch the next franchise, Toki suggested that Itsuki keep working with Puriketsu as his illustrator. *Genesis Sisters* was a commercial success, whether it gave Toki a stomach ulcer or not, and Setsuna himself was a fan of Itsuki's work. It seemed like an obvious choice.

But Itsuki declined the offer anyway. "I want someone who'll stick to his deadlines," he declared. "Someone who won't go incommunicado. Someone who's actually a decent person."

"True!" Toki declared at first. A bit later, he tried to walk it back. "Kind of a shame, though," he said. "I'd really like to keep Puriketsu on board for this project, but if the author doesn't want him, so be it! Such a shame, though..."

Itsuki, though, had another reason to refuse the offer. To him, deadlines were nothing more than nice goals to strive for. He was willing to flush them straight down the toilet if that resulted in something better in the end. No, the *real* reason, to put it succinctly: He didn't think his work was up to snuff for Setsuna's art. Definitely *not* the other way around.

"My novels totally lose out to your art," he explained to Setsuna later when he (naturally) asked why Itsuki went with someone else for the next series. "So...for now...I can't team up with you again."

"You're such a kid sometimes, sir," Setsuna replied, half laughing.

“That’s why I like you so much!”

Right now, Itsuki had a single-minded goal. Whenever he had the power to surpass *her* in this craft, *that* was when he wanted to strike. That was when he wanted “Illustrated by Puriketsu” on the cover, and that was when he wanted the inside art to be just as mind-bogglingly stupendous as the story he wrote. Then he’d stand at the very peak of the light novel industry.

Staring at the artwork Setsuna had left on the table, Itsuki replayed all those events in his mind once more. The trips to Okinawa and Hokkaido had recharged his mental batteries well enough.

Time to get to work.

First up, time to scan this art and make it my computer’s wallpaper.

Just as he had the thought, his editor Toki called him on the phone.

“If you’re looking for a new proposal, keep looking,” he said with a groan instead of saying hello.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s not about that.”

“Uh?”

“I was just wondering, is Puriketsu over there?”

“...Not now, no.”

“Oh... Well, if he shows up, get his ass over to editorial for me. Break his legs if you have to. I’ll vouch for you.”

“Um, is something up?” There was something slightly off-kilter about Toki’s tone of voice. It gave Itsuki the chills.

“...We don’t have his cover for the month yet, and we’re going balls to the wall to meet the deadline. I’ve been to his place every day this week, and he’s never there.”

“Oh, really?”

Setsuna was handling illustration work for another series Toki was managing. Toki had been dead set against assigning him to it, but the author had insisted. As Itsuki had expected, it wasn’t exactly a well-oiled machine.

“Do you have any idea where Puriketsu might be right now, Itsuki? ’Cause I swear I’m gonna kill that little brat this time...after I have him draw that cover...”

“Hmm...can’t say I do, no,” he lied, trying his best not to get caught up in this. There was no doubting that Setsuna Ena was a god, the highest class of illustrator in the business, but Itsuki hoped this god would be a little kinder to his editor’s intestinal fortitude whenever they teamed up again.

SETSUNA ENA

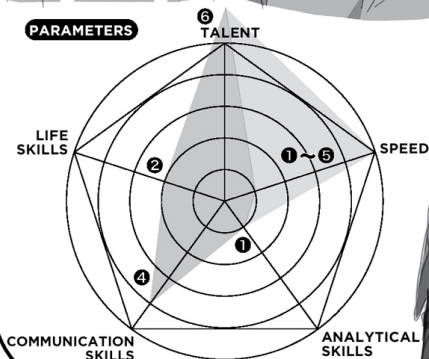
AGE: 16

Quit school because he was too lazy for studying, but working sucked, too, so then he wanted to be a manga artist at first, but doing manga looked like a huge pain in the ass, so he figured he'd be an illustrator instead since that seemed easier, and now he's gotten so popular that it's like holy crap, man.

Main Series: *Genesis Sisters of the New World*,
SILLIES



PARAMETERS



**LIVING IN THE MOMENT,
LAUGHING IN THE FACE
OF REALITY**

North-Meets-South Spring Rolls

It was evening, three days after Itsuki's return from Hokkaido, and Chihiro was at his place, cooking dinner. His windbreaker was still on beneath his apron as he got to work.

"Ah, hang on a sec," Itsuki interjected.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"I almost forgot about the crab."

"The crab? You mean Kani?" Chihiro said, puzzled.

"No, not her." He stood up and opened the fridge. Inside was an entire snow crab, easily twenty inches from one end to the other.

"An actual *crab*?" His brother goggled. "Where the hell did you..."

"I bought it in Hokkaido."

It had arrived this morning, packed in dry ice, and he had stuffed it in the fridge because it was too big to fit in the freezer. It was already thawing, assorted crab juices pooling on the bottom of the compartment, and the whole kitchen was starting to smell.

"Wait, Bro, you went to Hokkaido? When?"

"Three days ago."

"You didn't say anything about *that* to me."

"Well, it was kind of a rush trip. Setsuna dragged me there so we could eat some salmon roe or whatever."

"Setsuna? That's the guy who draws for your books, right?"

"Yeah. Puriketsu."

"You went with Puri..." Chihiro reddened a bit. "With Setsuna?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Oh..." He stared at the crab, looking a little jealous. "Boy, this looks incredible. What should I do with it...? Now that you've defrosted it, I guess we better use it... Why'd you buy a huge crab all by itself, though? You like snow crab that much?"

"N-no, not really!" Itsuki exclaimed, his own face now reddening. "It just...you know, looked really cool, so I wound up buying it. It's got, like, a shell and claws and everything."

"It looked 'cool'...?" Chihiro rolled his eyes as he took the carcass out of the fridge. "Oof, it's heavy. Wow, I have no idea what to do with this... You got anything in particular you want me to make out of this?"

“Crab paste is good.”

“...In...?”

“Whatever.”

“...Okay.”

Chihiro sighed a bit as he laid the crab on the kitchen counter. “Hmm... What to do,” he murmured, a light smile spreading across his lips as he loomed over the body, ablaze with excitement over this find.

Itsuki was about to return to his desk, leaving the kitchen to his brother, when he stopped.

“Oh, right.”

“What?”

“I got something else.” He opened the fridge again, taking out a vacuum-sealed package of something black in color.

“What’s that?”

“*Chiraga*.”

“‘Chiraga’...? Agh!”

The moment he peered into the package, he let out a scream like a kindergarten girl.

The bag in Itsuki’s hands, purchased in Okinawa, contained chiraga—the skin from a pig’s face. The nose was largely intact, as was the overall facial shape, and at first glance it looked like a decapitated head. Real horror-film stuff.

“Uh, wh-wh-what *is* that?”

“Chiraga. From a pig.”

“I think I saw that on TV once... It’s some famous thing from Okinawa, right?”

“Yeah, that’s where I bought it. I tried a little, and it was actually pretty good.”

“Uh?” Chihiro gave Itsuki a blank stare. “When were you in Okinawa?”

“A week ago.”

“Why?!”

“Ooh, well, my heater broke, and it was cold, so...”

Another odd look from Chihiro. “Just because of that? You could’ve come back to our place. It would’ve been a lot closer.”

“Yeah... Yeah, I guess I could’ve, huh?”

It wasn’t that the thought had never occurred to him. In fact, he had made a conscious decision not to.

“C’mom...,” Chihiro lightly sighed. He was a smart kid. He probably knew that his big brother was playing dumb with him. But thankfully, he didn’t take it any further.

“So this...chiraga?” he said, turning up his nose as he stared at the plastic bag. “How do you eat it?”

“It was cut up into really thin slices when I tried it.”

“Oh, yeah, you can do the same thing with pig ears, right? Maybe I can just do this up like that? Hmm, and that crab, too...” His eyes turned from the pig skin in front of him to the crab lying on the counter as he thought about this. “Crab and pork, huh...? Hmm...”

“You don’t have to use ’em both right now. The pork’ll keep for a while.”

“...Well, I’ll figure something out. You can go do work or something.”

“All right...”

Itsuki handed the pig’s face over to his suddenly impassioned brother and left the kitchen.



An hour later, once Chihiro was all done, the two of them laid out what turned out to be a pretty expansive dinner on the kotatsu and got to work. The final menu: chiraga sliced with lettuce and tomatoes; a salad seasoned with tangy ponzu sauce and lavished with crab legs; two types of spring rolls stuffed with finely sliced crab and pork skin; jellied crab and pork; and crab-and-pork fried rice.

Chihiro, apparently, had been on a mission to make sure every dish used both types of meat, instead of separating them. And every one of them worked. They tasted great—especially the spring rolls. The grease from the pork and the juices from the crab matched perfectly, creating an intense flavor explosion lurking underneath the crispy skin. Not only did it taste good—the meaty crab and firmly textured chiraga made for a remarkably fulfilling eating experience. Itsuki practically inhaled them, huffing steam out from his mouth and nose as he did.

“This is incredible... The miraculous harmony of the far north and far south of Japan... We’re gonna have to name this. South... Southern Cross... North... Northern Cross... Southern-Northern... Sou-Nor... Nor-Sou... How ’bout ‘North-Meets-South Spring Rolls’?”

He was trying to come up with a snappier name, like the ones cooking-oriented manga came up with all the time, but nothing sounded right, so he compromised a bit.

“You like them?”

“A lot,” Itsuki replied, nodding. Chihiro answered with an embarrassed smile.

“Did you go with Setsuna to Okinawa, too, by the way?”

“No, that was with Miyako and Kanikou.”

Chihiro’s eyebrows twitched. “Oh? Wow. A trip to Okinawa with two women?”

“...Something wrong with that?”

“Nah, nah... It’s just like...wow, you’re finally growing up, Bro.”

The appraisal sounded more like criticism to Itsuki’s ears and made him feel awkward.

“It... It’s not like traveling with them is some huge deal. It’s just a quick plane trip to Okinawa. Okay, maybe not *that* quick, but still, like, three hours or so. It’s just like visiting Grandma up in Gifu Prefecture. You’ve taken girls out before, too, haven’t you?”

“I...”

The phone in Chihiro’s pocket began ringing. He took it out and tapped on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Ooh, hey, Chi-hee?” a peppy-sounding female voice said.

“Um, one second,” Chihiro said as he hurriedly stood up and half jogged into the kitchen.

“I swear, you people with your good looks,” Itsuki muttered as he saw him go. Chihiro had no girlfriend at the moment, but when Itsuki had taken a few glances at the address book on his phone, the screen had been filled with women’s names. Completely different from how his phone had been during high school. He’d barely spoken to women at all in school, much less received messages from them. Or men, for that matter. He had been kind of a loner.

He distracted himself with another North-Meets-South Spring Roll. Recalling the darker days of high school was bringing him down.

Chihiro came back in a few more moments.

“Was that your lady, Chi-hee?” Itsuki asked, somewhat maliciously. The question made Chihiro’s face instantly redden.

“I *told* you, I don’t have a lady,” he protested. Itsuki declined to take it any further, and the rest of dinner was spent discussing the aquarium in Okinawa, the fish they’d enjoyed in Hokkaido, and so on.

After they finished, Chihiro put the leftovers in the fridge, washed and dried the dishes, cleaned the bath and toilet, wiped down the floor with a mop, wiped the desk, separated out the garbage, and left Itsuki’s apartment.

“See you later, Itsuki. Come visit home sometime, okay?”

“...Sure. When I feel like it.”

“.....”

Chihiro gave him a less-than-enthusiastic look for this before walking off.

“Oh, wait,” Itsuki said, returning to his room. There was a bag of souvenirs on the desk, and he fetched it for Chihiro. “Here’s some gifts for the family. Some *awamori* booze from Okinawa and Shiroy Koibito cookies from Hokkaido. I got a key chain, too, if you need it.”

Taking the bag, Chihiro fished the key chain out of it. A cartoony

rendition of a whale shark dangled from the ring.

“I can have this?”

“Yeah.”

He sheepishly looked up at his big brother.

“Um, th-thanks...”

“No prob.”

“I guess we’ll both have whale-shark key chains, then,” Chihiro said. It was a little cute of him. Sweet, one could almost say. For some reason, it made Itsuki’s heart skip a beat.

Valentine's Day

A week after North-Meets-South Spring Rolls were invented, the calendar read February 14—Valentine's Day. Haruto Fuwa, the Heartthrob Novelist, was at Itsuki's front door.

"Hey. I got some chocolate."

"...Why do I have to take chocolate from you?"

Haruto breezed past the peeved-looking Itsuki, opening the fridge and sticking several bottles of dark-colored beer inside.

"More Belgians?"

"Nah, these are Japanese."

"Wow...that's rare for you."

Haruto generally brought nothing but imported beer (mostly from Belgium), almost never a domestic choice.

"It's kind of like Valentine's Day beer, y'know? It's a big Japanese tradition to give chocolate on Valentine's, and I guess this brewery's trying it with beer, too."

"Huh," Itsuki said, picking up a bottle out of curiosity. It was the Imperial Chocolate Stout from the Sankt Gallen Brewery, southwest of Tokyo.

"...This has chocolate in it?"

"No, it's got roasted malt in it, which gives it a chocolate kind of flavor," Haruto explained. "It's a darker beer, and they only make it around this time of year. It's goood. You want some?"

"...Y-yeah," Itsuki replied, swallowing in anticipation. Haruto gave him a sadistic smile.

"Heh-heh-heh... Someone's sure being greedy today, huh?"

"Pfft, come on...! I am not..."

"Yeah? Then why are you holding on to it so tightly?"

"...! Ngh, argh, just lemme drink it!"

"Whoa, whoa, don't you know you're supposed to ask nicely? Come on. Beg for it."

"Why would *I* have to beg *you* for this...?"

"Oh, quit hiding it. You want this so bad right now, don't you? This big black bottle? You can't wait to fill your mouth with the thick, viscous liquid inside, right?"

"I... No, I...!"

“...What are you people doing?”

The two of them froze, then turned around. Nayuta was there by the front door.

“Practicing my sadism,” Haruto cheerfully explained. “I figured girls would like a character like that.”

“Really...?” a shocked Itsuki said. He’d had no idea.

“...I have no interest in whatever kind of act you’re pulling, Prince Manwhore, but it was neat seeing Itsuki cower before you like that... Maybe I should act a lot more aggressive with him, too.”

“Look, don’t start coming up with any stupid ideas, Kanikou...”

Nayuta’s face was serene as she went inside, ignoring Itsuki’s obvious alarm. In another moment, all three were at the kotatsu, Haruto popping open a bottle and pouring the beer out into glasses for him and Itsuki. The chocolate-brown liquid built an attractive head in the glass, filling the air with seductive fragrances.

“Hey, that smells good. I wish I could have some.”

“You can have some root beer.”

“I think I will,” Nayuta sharply replied as she took a can of exactly that out of her backpack and poured it out. It looked a bit like the chocolate beer at first sight, letting out a uniquely medicinal smell in its glass that made Haruto and Itsuki wince.

“Damn, it smells like a wet washcloth...”

“...You actually brought that with you?” Itsuki asked.

“Mm-hmm. I bought a whole box off of Amazon.”

Root beer like this, naturally carbonated and made with a mix of real herbs and spices, was uncommon in Japan outside of Okinawa, where the local A&W chain had made it a regional favorite. Its singular taste and smell meant you forever loved it or hated it, with some people comparing it to a drinkable menthol pain-relief patch. Miyako had made it through only half her drink at A&W, saying it tasted as if someone had poured maple syrup on a box of pain-relief patches. Itsuki had made it all the way; he’d said, “It’s kind of like Dr Pepper with a bunch of medicine in it—I don’t mind it, but I’d rather just have a Dr Pepper.” Nayuta, meanwhile, had helped herself to four free refills—“What is this stuff? It’s awesome!”—and completely destroyed her stomach.

“Oh, lemme take a pic before you drink it.”

Haruto lined up his and Itsuki’s glasses, with the beer bottle in front of his drinking partner, making the peace sign with his right hand and framing the shot so as not to include Itsuki’s face. He then tweeted it with the comment “It’s Valentine’s Day, so I’m enjoying some chocolate beer with Itsuki! (*^_^*) ♥”

“...Still going with that gay persona, huh?” a stunned Itsuki asked.

“Yeah, it’s working a lot more than I thought it would. I think I’m

gonna stick with it until the anime's first run wraps up. See? I'm already getting replies."

His smartphone's screen was alive with messages like "You guys sure are in love, huh?" and "Have a blast!" and "ㄱ(ㄱ^o^)ㄴ," a Japanese emoticon that, in this context, was akin to tweeting "GAAAAAAAAAY" back at him.

"...I really couldn't care less about Prince Manwhore's attempt to play LGBT for his own ends, but aren't these fans gonna harass the hell out of Itsuki once him 'n' me get married?"

"Ahh, I think it's fine. All these people know it's just a fun little act, probably."

As Haruto addressed Nayuta's concerns, Itsuki said "You don't have to worry about *that* happening" with a groan and squinted as he took a drink.

"Ooh...?"

Despite having "chocolate" on the label, it wasn't very sweet at all. A vivid bitterness spread across his mouth, reminiscent of cacao. It surprised him.

"This is... I think something sweet would go great with it."

"You're right. It feels kind of like coffee to me, so I think it'd work well," Haruto said after sampling it for himself.

"I picked up some chocolate truffles in Hokkaido. Let's do that," Itsuki said, standing up before Nayuta stopped him.

"W-wait a minute, Itsuki! Why do you have chocolate for yourself at a time like this?"

"...What's the big deal? Not like having chocolate around is a bad thing."

Writing a novel was a tremendous mental challenge. Ensuring your brain retained proper glucose levels was vital, and an empty stomach was a fiendish villain when it came to maintaining concentration. Chocolate was the perfect drug for both maladies. Itsuki always kept a supply on hand.

"Did you bring some for him, Nayuta?"

"Of course... I was just waiting for the right opportunity to present it. So much for that," Nayuta sniffed.

"All right. Why don't you have hers, Itsuki? I'll take the truffles."

"...Kanikou's chocolate...?" A look of genuine concern arose on his face. "Hopefully you didn't spike it with anything."

"I *bought* it from a *store*," Nayuta snapped back, removing two gift-wrapped boxes from her pack and offering them to Itsuki.

"...Two?"

"Myaa got you some, too, just to be nice."

"Oh."

"...I really wanted to make my own and infuse it with my love

nectar, but Myaa said that'd be a bad idea, so I went with store-bought instead."

"...You did good, Miyako." Itsuki thanked her from the bottom of his heart.

Both packages were from Godiva—Nayuta's a special Valentine's edition in a heart-shaped box, Miyako's a regular old bar. Itsuki popped a piece into his mouth after taking another swig of chocolate beer. A pleasant sort of sweetness swelled across his mouth, buoyed by the remaining bitterness on his tongue. It didn't banish the umami from the beer—if anything, it expanded upon it. A perfect pairing. Haruto did the same with his own, not forgetting to tweet a pic with the caption "I got chocolate from Itsuki >///>" first.

The first bottle didn't last long after that. The second one was another Sankt Gallen special, a Sweet Vanilla Stout. The vanilla made this one notably sweeter, but it still worked just as well with the chocolate. The three of them enjoyed a round of the card game Dominion as Itsuki and Haruto polished it off; they then turned to Godiva's homeland of Belgium for further inspiration—Gouden Carolus Christmas and Winterkoninkske, two very sweet beers—and the drinking session formally began in earnest.

It was just about time for dinner, and they decided to enjoy it with a mac-and-cheese gratin and some beef stew Chihiro had made yesterday. The meat in the stew was still nice and soft after a day, providing a deep, creamy sort of taste.

"Whoa! Your brother rocks at cooking, doesn't he? He could seriously run a restaurant." Haruto's high praise was 100 percent sincere.

"Hff... I like it," Nayuta added as she blew on the soup. "Just what I'd expect from my future brother-in-law."

Itsuki ignored Nayuta's flight of fancy. "...You know, I think he used some chocolate in this as a seasoning. He said something about polyphenols affecting the taste of the meat, I think."

And I'm sure he's getting crap-tons of chocolate from all the girls today, he added silently.

The doorbell rang as they ate. Itsuki grumpily got up and looked through the peephole. Outside was Kenjiro Toki, his editor.

"Oh, crap! It's the editor! Run!" Itsuki called over his shoulder.

Haruto kept drinking his beer, unaffected. Nayuta promptly dived under the table. Just as Itsuki was reaching out to lock the door, it opened.

"...Well. Looks like someone's having fun."

Toki's face was expressionless, his cheeks hollow. The rings under his eyes were remarkably deep, completely hiding his usual tough-guy visage.

“Wh-what did you need...? I don’t have any new proposal yet,” Itsuki ventured.

Toki wearily sighed. “...I don’t wanna talk about work for the rest of the night.”

“...No? So what brings you here, then?”

“I got your Valentine’s Day chocolate. Haruto said he was with you on Twitter, so I’m dropping his off, too.”

“Ooh! I’ve been waiting for that!” Itsuki’s face grew notably brighter.

“...Well, here I am,” Toki replied as he stepped in.

“Good to see you, sir!” Haruto said with a smile.

“Yeah, thanks... And I know you’re here, Nayuta—I saw your shoes by the front door.”

“You must have the wrong person,” Nayuta said, wriggling out from under the kotatsu. “My name is Kanikou Hashima. I’m Itsuki’s wife. Thanks for taking such good care of my husband all the time.”

Toki rolled his eyes. “I’m not gonna tell on you. I’m not even your editor.”

“Ooh, nice! You’re always so understanding!” Nayuta picked up Haruto’s freshly emptied glass, refilled it with beer, and offered it to Toki. “Here!”

“...All right. Just one, though.”

Toki slugged it down like a can of juice.

“Pfahhh!”

“...That beer didn’t come cheap...,” Haruto complained, too quietly for Toki to hear.

“Right. Your chocolate. And here’s Haruto’s.”

He handed them a pair of boxes wrapped in paper. Itsuki’s was much larger and heavier than his friend’s.

“Thank you very much!”

“Heh-heh-heh... More gifts from my fans, huh?”

They both opened the boxes and laid out the contents on the table. Haruto had received about ten different packages, but Itsuki had too many to fit on the small surface.

“Hah-hah-hah! You see that, Haruto? This is a sign of my true strength! I’m so popular, I feel like I could save the world right now! Heh-heh-heh... Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha, *cough, cough!*”

Haruto kept his usual smile painted on his face as Itsuki choked on his own laughter. A little crestfallen, he commented, “...It’s not exactly for you. It’s chocolate for the characters in your work.”

“Exactly! It’s not like you’re popular yourself, Itsuki. I’m the only one who truly loves you.”

“Hah-hah-hah! Say whatever you will, losers! How’s it feel, huh?! How’s it feel for the Heartthrob Novelist to lose out so badly to the

likes of me?!”

“Ugh,” Haruto replied, beginning to highly resent this.

Every year around Valentine’s, readers would send great heaps of chocolate and other snacks to the editorial office. Some of it, a very small amount, would be addressed to the writers themselves, but most of it had the names of their fictional characters written on the gift tags.

Surprisingly enough, despite the difference in sales numbers, Itsuki’s fictional creations always received far more of these treats than Nayuta’s or Haruto’s. This was understandable in Haruto’s case, *Chevalier of the Absolute World*’s audience being around 95 percent male. Nayuta’s *Landscape* series featured a large cast of realistic, flawed young men and women, many of whom were in relationships with each other, and Nayuta herself was female, so she had a lot of women fans. However, her work just wasn’t the kind that drove people to send real-life chocolate to their favorite characters.

Itsuki, meanwhile—although recently plumbing the boundaries of sanity with his devotion to the little-sister stereotype—still had a remarkably robust female audience, thanks to the plethora of studly, beyond-reality male characters that populated his novels. It helped that *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, his second work, reined the sister worship in a little—this was back when Itsuki mostly listened to what his editor told him. The adjustment worked perfectly with Puriketsu’s art; it turned out he did just as expert a job on macho male characters as he did on young girls and their asses. The series was over, yes, but its characters still had their die-hard fans.

All this meant that, while Itsuki often fostered an inferiority complex over the handsome Haruto and the utterly perfect Chihiro, Valentine’s was the one day of the year when he got to lord his victory over them with utter abandon.

“Heh-heh-heh... Time to chow down on these offerings from my teeming millions!”

Despite his imperious tone, he took pains to neatly unwrap each box and try a piece from them all, clearly savoring them more than the high-grade chocolate Nayuta and Miyako had provided. Nayuta attempted to kill him with the power of her stare as he did.



In due time, Toki got tanked, completely forgot about his “just one” promise, and started haranguing Haruto and Nayuta.

“Harutoooo, how come yer always so goddamn *smoooooth* with yer work, huhh? So on *tiiiiime*?”

“Er, yes, um... Thank you.”

“I wish summa the other asshole writers and illustrators we got would learn a lesson ’r two from ya!”

“Well, that’s kind of...”

“Nayuduhhh!!”

“Y-yes?”

“You gotta do some work for us, lady! You gotta stick to yer deadlines! ’Cause you’re, like, one’a our headlining authors! You and Puriketsu, too... How come it’s, like, the more creative you are, the less you work?!”

“...I will be sure to think about that,” Nayuta deadpanned, “and do my best to bring into consideration what I can and cannot do about the feedback.”

“Yeah, we probably better get home, Itsuki...”

“...Right. Keep up the good work.”

“Whoa, wait! Don’t abandon me here!”

With Nayuta and Haruto gone, Itsuki was now the sole recipient of Toki’s whining.

A week ago, once Toki had finally figured out that Setsuna “Puriketsu” Ena was in Hokkaido, he’d traveled up there himself, computer and tablet setup in hand. He’d successfully accosted him in the middle of the Snow Festival and locked him up in a Sapporo hotel room until he finished his assigned artwork. He had finally made it back to Tokyo this morning, and he looked deeply exhausted, body and soul.

“So how d’you like that? I go all the way up to freakin’ Hokkaido, and I’m stuck in the goddamn hotel the whole time. No sightseein’, nothin’ good to eat, no hittin’ the red-light district... Nothin’! I mean...*fuuuuuuck*...”

“...Yeah, that does sound pretty rough. Y’know, I just happen to have some Royce’ chocolate here. You want some?”

“Ooh... Thank you... This is so, so great... Mm, chocolate...”

Toki cried as he savored the treat, fell backward, and conked out on the floor, snoring. He didn’t move again until morning, when he staggered off to his office with a blistering headache. His boss didn’t take him to task for it. This sort of thing **happened to editors all the time.**

ITSUKI HASHIMA

AGE: 20

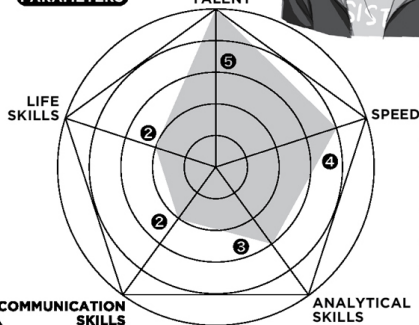
A novelist who writes nothing but little-sister-oriented stories. A born whiner who loves arguing for arguing's sake but is still a nice guy deep down.

Novels: *Sister of the Apocalypse* (single volume), *Genesis Sisters of the New World* (8 volumes, complete), *Kami-Imo!* (single volume), *Illuminating the Deep Dark* (single volume), *Sisterly Combat* (4 volumes), *It's Got to Be a Mistake That My Sister's So Cute* (single volume), *My Sister Ono* (single volume), *All About My Little Sister* (3 volumes)



PARAMETERS

TALENT



THE MODERN PYGMALION, TOILING TO CREATE THE ULTIMATE LITTLE SISTER

Valentine's Day EX (feat. Haruto Fuwa and His Hard-to-Read Sister)

Night had fallen on February 14. Haruto, having chosen to flee Itsuki's place rather than deal with Kenjiro Toki's drunken tirades, arrived home to find a sweet smell emanating from the kitchen. Chocolate, just like what he'd smelled over at Itsuki's.

"...?"

It made him raise an eyebrow as he headed over, only to find his sister working on something.

"Hee-hee! This is perfect! Just a bit of cocoa powder, and—"

"...What're you up to?"

"Hyagh?!"

His sister twirled toward him, clearly flustered. The apron she was wearing sported a couple of dark stains. There was a bit of it on one cheek as well.

"Wha...wha...what're you *doing*?!" she shouted, said cheeks now ablaze in red. "Coming home at a time like this! I hate you!"

"Hmm? I'm free to come home whenever I want to."

"No you're not, dumbass! You were drinking at your friend's place, weren't you?! You shouldn't be home for a while yet!"

"Yeah, yeah... Is it bad for me to be home right now or something?"

"Wha—?! No, not really! I just hate it when you're around, is all!"

"Oh, really? Guess I'll have to go apartment hunting soon," an exasperated Haruto said. This only further set his sister off.

"What?! You—you know you can't do that, dumbass! Not like you'd ever be able to live by yourself!"

"Sure I can."

"You can't, all right? Plus, if you leave, who's gonna do my homework for me? Who's gonna run over to the convenience store to pick stuff up for me? Huh?!"

"You should really do your own homework, at least..."

He knew from previous experience that arguing further about his living alone would be fruitless. So he decided to shift the topic to her studies. He turned his eyes toward the kitchen counter as he did,

behind his sister. There were several small, rounded pieces of chocolate lined up in a row, along with a bag of cocoa powder and a bowl with melted chocolate sticking to the sides.

“...Are you making chocolate truffles?”

“Y-yeah. Is that a problem?!”

“No, but... Why’re you making chocolate right now? Valentine’s Day was today.”

He had a point—she was a good day late at getting started on this.

“It—it’s not like I meant to give this on Valentine’s Day or anything! I just saw it on TV, and some of my friends were giving these out, and I wanted to eat some chocolate, too! That’s all!”

“Uh-huh.”

Haruto could understand the urge, if she had seen someone else with chocolate. He didn’t understand why it had to be handmade, but still.

“...Well, hope it turns out good. Pretty hard to screw up chocolate truffles, at least.”

“Of course it is! It’s not like I’d keep messing up the recipe for these, of all things! It’s gonna be the best damn chocolate ever!”

She turned her gaze down a bit.

“And, um, I suppose you could maybe have a couple of them, too.”

“Ahh, I’m fine, thanks. I got my own.”

He lifted the bag of chocolate he’d received while at Itsuki’s place to demonstrate. His sister’s eyes practically popped out of their sockets.

“Wh-who gave you those?!”

“My fans,” he replied, a bit proud. “They sent them to my editor.”

His sister rolled her eyes and groaned, exposing her canines. “W-well, my chocolate’s gonna taste better!” she practically screamed, grabbing the cocoa powder bag and violently dumping it all over the chocolate on the counter.

“H-hey—agh?!”

Then she picked up one chocolate and stuffed it into the concerned Haruto’s mouth. Given few other options, he broke it up with his teeth, licking at it with his tongue.

“Well?!”

“...It’s okay, I guess,” Haruto replied. It was his honest opinion. It also made his sister sulk as she threw her apron to the floor.

“I can’t believe what a world-class dumbass you are, Bro! Now I don’t even want to eat these anymore! This is your fault, so you should eat all of ’em instead!”

“Huh?!”

“Listen to me! You have to eat every single one!”

Haruto had no time to protest this shoddy treatment, because his sister then marched right out of the kitchen. Still peeved, he looked at the chocolate on the counter and helped himself to one more piece. It was...just okay. There were still around ten chocolate truffles there, now thoroughly drowned in cocoa powder. It looked like his fans would have to wait until at least tomorrow for their gifts to be enjoyed.

And as he silently ate the chocolates, Haruto mused all over again, *There is absolutely nothing good about having a little sister.*

Concerning Nayuta Kani as a Literary Writer

“Novels are written and read, I feel, as an act of defiance against the fact that we have but one life to live.” These immortal words came from writer Kaoru Kitamura, but in this regard—the knack novels have of allowing readers to live a life besides their own—Nayuta Kani’s *Landscape* series has no equal. Its world is based on modern-day Japan, and while it has its quirks, there is nothing that unique about it, and the story itself proceeds in fairly orthodox fashion. The characters are none of the eminent heroes that find popularity in light novels; many of them are notable primarily for their many flaws. However, the reader finds themselves somehow enthralled with them, projecting their own persona onto each one as they become lost in the novels—as if by magic. The expressive tale is told using phraseology so unique fans refer to it as “Kani-ese,” and while that may play a great part in the attraction, one must chalk it up to more than simple words strung together. All the components that make up a novel, from the way the characters are molded and positioned to the settings and expressiveness, come together to form an immaculate balance, conjuring up a force powerful enough to defy analysis. Even if someone took apart the *Landscape* series and attempted to rebuild it themselves, they could never duplicate the magic at the core of it all. The fact that it has yet to be adapted into a manga, anime, or live-action drama, despite its exceptional sales figures, is likely linked to this. It is fair to say that reading the *Landscape* series is akin to living out another lifetime—an experience that can only be gained through reading Nayuta Kani’s work. (By Ikeda)

“This ain’t gonna work.”

The editor in chief tossed Ikeda’s printout back on his desk.

This was the main office of *Leonardo*, a monthly newsmagazine, and Ikeda—still one of the new faces on the staff, having joined just over a year ago—managed the novel-review section.

“...It won’t?” the discouraged Ikeda asked, sizing up his manager.

“I mean, I think I kind of get what you’re trying to say, though.”

“Right?”

“...But this is all written from your perspective. All you’re saying is ‘Wow, this novel’s like magic. It’s totally awesome.’ And you’re just guessing at why it hasn’t been adapted into anything, aren’t you? So yeah, I know what you’re trying to say,” he repeated, “but try again. You’d need to have already read *Landscape* to understand your point here. We’re supposed to be introducing books to people in this section. What makes this book good? What’s the attraction? Write it so people can pick up on that kind of thing... I know how tough that can be sometimes, though.”

“Yeah, it is,” Ikeda said, hanging his head down as he turned back toward his desk. Then he turned to the editor in chief again.

“...By the way, sir, do you think they’re ever gonna try to adapt *Landscape* into anything?”

“I haven’t heard about anything getting the green light yet. They must’ve gotten a ton of offers by now.”

“Yeah, no doubt about it.”

“...Though I agree with you: It’s got something you can’t duplicate in any other media. You might’ve actually hit upon something there.”



A long while back, just after the second book in the *Landscape* series was published, Nayuta Kani was informed by her editor, Yamagata, that the offers for so-called “media mix” campaigns were already starting to roll in. Comic versions, TV anime series, first-run anime films, stage shows, live-action TV dramas and movies—multiple offers for each type of media. And these weren’t fly-by-night opportunists, either—some of the talent involved included name-brand anime studios behind long strings of hits or film directors with a shelf full of major awards on their résumés.

“I think we should really consider at least a few of these media launches,” Yamagata suggested.

“Mmm. If I say yes to that, is that gonna make me a lot busier?” Nayuta answered, looking as spaced out as always.

“Well... There’ll be some storyboards and scripts to read through. You’ll probably have more interview requests, too.”

“That’s okay, then, thanks.”

“Whoa, don’t rush it! This is your chance to get the word out even more about your work.”

Nayuta blushed a little at the flustered Yamagata. “But if I get any busier...then I won’t have as much time to be with Itsuki, will I?”

Yamagata spent most of the next hour attempting to convince

Nayuta otherwise, but she never budged. He could tell that the more tactics he tried to employ, the more it simply rankled Nayuta, and creating unnecessary tension between her and the publisher would bring nothing but harm to both sides. Plus, even Yamagata believed that the appeal of the *Landscape* series wasn't easily translated to other formats.

It's not, but it still seems like such a waste, Yamagata thought as he watched Nayuta skip out of the office and toward Itsuki's place. It was a chance to boost recognition for both the series and Nayuta herself, and she was tossing it away because it might interfere with her time spent chasing men around? Especially a man like Itsuki Hashima? Why did that sister-obsessed f—k's deranged library of smut novels even have to exist? ...And, of course, they did have to exist, or else Nayuta would've never become a writer.

Ah, why did the heavens have to grant such astonishing literary talent to such an insatiably horny young woman? Something about the world Yamagata lived in seemed to guarantee that he never got everything he wanted. *If I'd had the kind of talent Nayuta has*, Yamagata (a former writer) wailed to himself, *I could've set off a revolution in the literary world*.

Then he realized, *It's times like this when it's perfect to read a Nayuta Kani novel. You want to turn to people just like yourself, lost in the face of such weighty, inscrutable matters, and live in their lives for a while. It gives you a fresh outlook on life*.

Die in a Fire, Tax Returns

Being a writer, in general, is a sole proprietorship. This means that writers are responsible for self-reporting all their income and expenditures, from January 1 to December 31 of each year, in order to determine the income tax they owe.

This is done in Japan by filing what's known as a "final tax return" sometime between February 16 and March 15 of the following year; delaying it beyond this exposes you to penalties.

For a writer, a certain percentage of any payment received from a publisher is generally withheld for income tax—around 10 percent for the first million yen and around 20 percent beyond that. As a result, if you're honest in your final return (and aren't a massively bestselling author raking in royalties hand over fist), you can generally expect to receive a refund for any excess tax withheld.

This means that, as annoying as they are to fill out, filing a complete final tax return is vital if you want to rescue your withholdings. That doesn't change the fact, however, that keeping track of all income and expenditures for an entire year is a huge pain in the ass. It is possible by yourself, as long as you really keep on top of things, but for most, borrowing the services of a professional is the easiest, most reliable way of handling matters. In other words, a licensed tax accountant.



It was a sunny day in late February when a woman paid a visit to Itsuki Hashima's apartment. She looked young—like a child, in fact. Maybe fifteen years old at the most. Her skin was lightly tinted, a worthy canvas for her blond hair, blue eyes, and frilly, childish crimson-red dress. Nothing could've looked more touchingly sweet, but her eyes glinted with an unmistakable sharpness, and her smile was somehow sadistic.

This was Ashley Ono, exact age unknown. Her job:

"Ashley Ono, tax accountant. Are you Itsuki Hashima, my client?"

"Um... Y-yeah. Thanks for coming..."

Itsuki found Ashley's haughty self-introduction a little nerve-racking as she stood there at the front door, running her eyes up and down his body.

After three years of writing, this would be the fourth final tax return he filed but the first year he hired someone to help him with it. His first return came not long after his debut; he'd had only one book published by then, and he hadn't bothered saving any of his receipts, so there wasn't much to fill out. He managed to cobble together the second and third returns following tutorials on the Net, but he wound up having to file revised reports both years after discovering a couple of math errors.

It was extensive work for a relatively small refund, and Itsuki was sick of it. "Why do I have to do all this crap every single year?" he'd said with a groan. "I'd make a ton more money if I just used the time to write!" So he'd asked Haruto for a tax-accountant reference, and Ashley Ono was the name he'd received.

The conversation had gone a bit like this:

"Hey, Haruto, you know any good tax accountants?"

"...By 'good,' do you mean 'high quality'?"

"Um... Yeah, what else would I mean?"

"...Never mind. I've got the perfect one for you. She's incredibly talented, and you can totally rely on her. I kind of think she'd like you, too."

Haruto was clearly hinting at something, but Itsuki didn't let it bother him.

Among self-employed people, authors were kind of unique, and there weren't many of them. Even a seasoned tax accountant might not have a lot of experience handling them. Along those lines, Ashley Ono was apparently fairly well known in publishing circles for her strengths with creative types.

Now Ashley had invited herself to sit down in the fancy office chair Itsuki used for work. "Hmph. Pretty clean-looking place for some kid living by himself," she said as she looked around the place.

"Oh, thanks," Itsuki replied, unsure where he was supposed to sit.

"All right. Shall we get started, then? Can I see your payment records?"

"...Um, sure."

The pay stubs from his publisher, as well as his receipts and credit-card statements, were all inside a plastic file folder divided into months. He handed it over to her.

"...Hmm. You actually organized your receipts by month? You're a lot more detail oriented than I thought," Ashley said, almost looking disappointed. The organizational work was all thanks to Chihiro, but Itsuki didn't feel that was important to mention. "My...", she

continued as she fished out a pay stub from the folder. "You're making quite a lot, aren't you?"

"...Yeah, it's been an okay year, I guess," Itsuki replied, still forced to stand up.

"Oh, you can sit wherever you want."

"...Oh. Okay."

So he knelt on the floor Japanese-style. It was tremendously unsatisfying, but there was no place else handy.

"Hmm... Copies of your old final tax returns, too? Hmmm... Pretty steady earnings, for an author... No point smoothing these over with the average taxation rate, but not quite enough to bother incorporating with, either..."

Itsuki nervously watched as Ashley continued to mutter to herself. She seemed to take a sheer sense of joy from it.

"...By the way, is this your registered place of residence?" she suddenly asked.

"...No, I'm still registered back at home."

He hadn't bothered to switch it out after moving, since the family home was in the same city anyway.

"Is it close to here?"

"...Maybe about twenty minutes by car."

"Ah. Good. In that case, we'll declare this apartment to be your office. That way, we can claim ninety percent of your rent as business expenses."

"Ninety percent...?!"

"You use this place as a dedicated workspace. At night, you return to your family's residence and sleep there, and then you commute here for work. Right?"

Itsuki found Ashley's preresolved decisions a tad unnerving.

"Well, I mean, I live here, pretty much... I got a bed and everything..."

"Oh, that's just for the occasional nap."

"Umm, well, if we're calling it that, those're some pretty long naps, ma'am..."

"It's just for the occasional nap," she repeated, accepting zero differences of opinion.

Itsuki gave up. "...It's just for the occasional nap, and I sleep at my parents' place at night."

"Mm." Ashley nodded. "Did you make any high-end purchases last year? Like a car?"

"...I don't own a car. That chair's from the year before... Oh, I *did* buy that laptop last year."

"Aw. Too bad you didn't splurge a little and buy a fancy import car or something."

“That’d be crazy, ma’am,” Itsuki countered. “I don’t even have a license.”

“Oh, just joking,” Ashley retorted with a smile. “I think you can get away with spending a bit more of your money. Writing novels, as self-employed careers go, usually don’t involve a lot of necessary expenses. You know what I mean?”

“...I suppose, yeah.”

He understood what she was getting at. A butcher needed to spend money on meat to turn a profit on processed goods; they’d have running costs to keep the store open and the freezers operational, and having employees meant having salaries to pay out. Manga artists needed to regularly purchase pens, ink, and paper, or maybe scanners, tablets, and a computer powerful enough to run image-editing software if they had made the leap to digital. Hiring assistants, if they were at that level, would be the greatest expense of all. Novelists, meanwhile, didn’t need much besides a PC to write on. If you could bang text into an editor, you were good, so even a cheap one from several generations ago would function just fine for years on end. You generally didn’t need to hire anyone else, either. In terms of outlay to get started, there were fewer cheaper careers to take up than writing novels.

“It’s my job as a tax accountant to find as many government-approved ways of increasing your required expenses as possible. You’ve been reporting the cost of your books as research costs up to now, right?”

“Right.”

There was very, very little investment required to write novels, but that didn’t mean (most of the time, anyway) that you needed nothing else. A creative endeavor like this basically involved taking what was inside your brain and outputting it to some form of media, but (most of the time) you needed something to output first. Simply cobbling together what you’d personally experienced over the years might let you write one or two volumes, but (most of the time) that wouldn’t be enough to produce a constant stream of commercially viable content. So—most of the time—you needed some input before you could start outputting.

An easy-to-understand example of this is collecting books on some historical figure so you could write about them or listening to someone lecture about a specialized piece of technology so you could insert it into your work. Or traveling to certain locations for use as story settings.

These sorts of directly connected resources could easily be reported as necessary business expenses, but there were other not-so-direct things that also counted. For a writer, novels in general all

counted as “research material.” You needed to read novels to know how to write novels, and people generally understood that logic—regardless of how well it described you, personally, as an author. This also applied, for the most part, to things like manga, magazines, and other books on specialized subjects that weren’t directly relevant to your work.

The tricky part was how to classify nonbook entertainment—CDs, DVDs and Blu-rays, movie tickets, action figures and models, travel to places not directly connected to your books, and so on. If the tax office asked you “How did you take advantage of this in your work?” and you could provide a concrete answer, then that absolutely counted as an expense. But if the connection was weak or overly vague or you spent money sheerly for the sake of pleasure, what then?

“So how did you report nonbook items up to now?”

“Well, with the stuff I bought for my novels, I reported all of that as research materials.”

“Ooh. Good lad.” Ashley snickered. “...I love taking good lads like you and exposing them to the face of evil.”

“Um, pardon?”

“Oh, nothing,” Ashley said, shaking her head as she stood up and walked toward the shelf lined with figures and models of anime robots. “I’ve done some research into your writings,” she said as she marveled at them. “You like little sisters, hmm?”

“I love them.”

“Hmm.” Ignoring Itsuki’s immediate announcement, Ashley pointed at one of the figures on the shelf. “I think I’ve seen this girl before.”

“That’s Kirino Kousaka, the main heroine of *Oreimo* and the hero’s little sister. What a goddess! Wow, even tax accountants know about her...”

“And who’re these two little girls in the cat ears and the swimsuits?”

“That’s Kobato Hasegawa, the goddess who’s the little sister of the hero in *Haganai*, and her fellow goddess Maria Takayama.”

“...I think I read a synopsis of the movie version of that once. The heroines were these little girls, though...? Ah, not that it matters. And who’s this woman with the rather well-developed chest?”

“Suguha Kirigaya, the main heroine of *Sword Art Online* and one goddess of a little sister to the protagonist.”

“Ah, yes. I’ve heard of that *Sword*...whatever through my publisher contacts. They’re stuck inside a video-game world or something, yes? And this is one of them?”

“Oh, um, that’s her in the real world, yeah.”

“Hmm. So the heroine was this buxom in real life?”

“Yep.”

Sadly, there was nobody in the room to yell “No! The main heroine of SAO is another girl!” at them.

“...And this lady in the school uniform?”

“Ui Hirasawa. She’s the godly main heroine of *K-On!* and the protagonist’s little sister.”

“...That title’s famous enough that I know a little about it, but I don’t remember her playing the role of the main heroine... And this one?”

“Elpeo Ple. The godlike star heroine of *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ* and the protagonist’s little sister.”

“All right. So is this robot that looks like a moth someone’s little sister, too?”

Ashley was pointing at a pair of red-and-black Gundam robots lined up next to each other.

“Those are the Qubeley Mk-II models piloted by Ple and her godlike little sister Ple Two. They’re classified as mobile suits, but they aren’t Gundams.”

“Well, if it’s a robot in an anime, it’s all Gundam to me.” She turned around, apparently getting sick of asking about every single piece in the collection. “...So what you’re saying is that every figure on this shelf is a little-sister character of one sort or another?”

“Yeah.” Itsuki nodded.

“Hmm. I think it wouldn’t be a problem to count all of this as research material.”

“No!”

Ashley arched her eyebrows at the bark of denial.

“...No what?”

“The robot models are one thing, but these girls aren’t ‘materials’! I bought them all because I felt a pure love for them! I can’t put them into a category as cold and unfeeling as ‘materials!’”

“...Materials, then?”

“N-no...” Itsuki shook his head, flinching at the cold, unfeeling eyes staring at him.

“Look, do you want to pay less taxes or not?”

“I do...but I can’t sully the good name of my little sisters like that!”

“If we classify these as research materials, you can use the money you’ll save to buy more little-sister figures.”

Itsuki’s eyes bugged out, as if he’d been struck by lightning. His face was serene.

“...These figures are genuine, authentic *research materials*. I use them fully in all my work. Thank you.”

“Tee-hee-hee...” Ashley nodded. “You are in good hands.” Then

she turned her attention to the rows of anime Blu-rays and video games on the shelf. "Hmm... You have quite a game collection. And what kind of game is this? The one called *The Little Sister Who Loved Her Brother So Much, She Wore His Boxers on Her Head as She Pleasured Herself Daily*?"

"...It's a game featuring a girl who loves her brother so much, she wears his boxers on her head as she pleasures herself daily," Itsuki replied, blushing all the way to his ears.

"All right. And how about this one: *No, Big Bro, We're Siblings!: Beautiful Sister-Wife Caught in Forbidden Relationship*?"

"It's a game about a beautiful sister-wife caught in a forbidden relationship."

"What's a 'sister-wife'?"

"A sister who's your wife, ma'am."

"Seems like a rather complex concept to me. Let's see here... *Big Brother's Counterattack: One Year Since a Giant Anteater Killed My Sister*?"

"Oh, that game sucks. There was no sister in it at all," Itsuki spat.

"But it says on the box that an anteater killed her, doesn't it...? What about this one, *Boink-Sis*?"

"It's a game where you boink your sis. The ending makes you cry so much, I swear."

"And *I'm Your Sister—It's Not Weird to Eat Your Poo at All, Big Bro!* ...It's not?"

"It is. That's what makes it so good."

"...I'm impressed by your decisiveness."

Completing her rounds, Ashley sat back in her chair and began checking the credit-card statements. Itsuki returned to the floor and watched her.

"Hmm... Certainly use Amazon a lot, don't you? I'll compare these with your receipts when I return to the office, but... All these four-hundred-yen and six-hundred-yen purchases. Were these all e-books?"

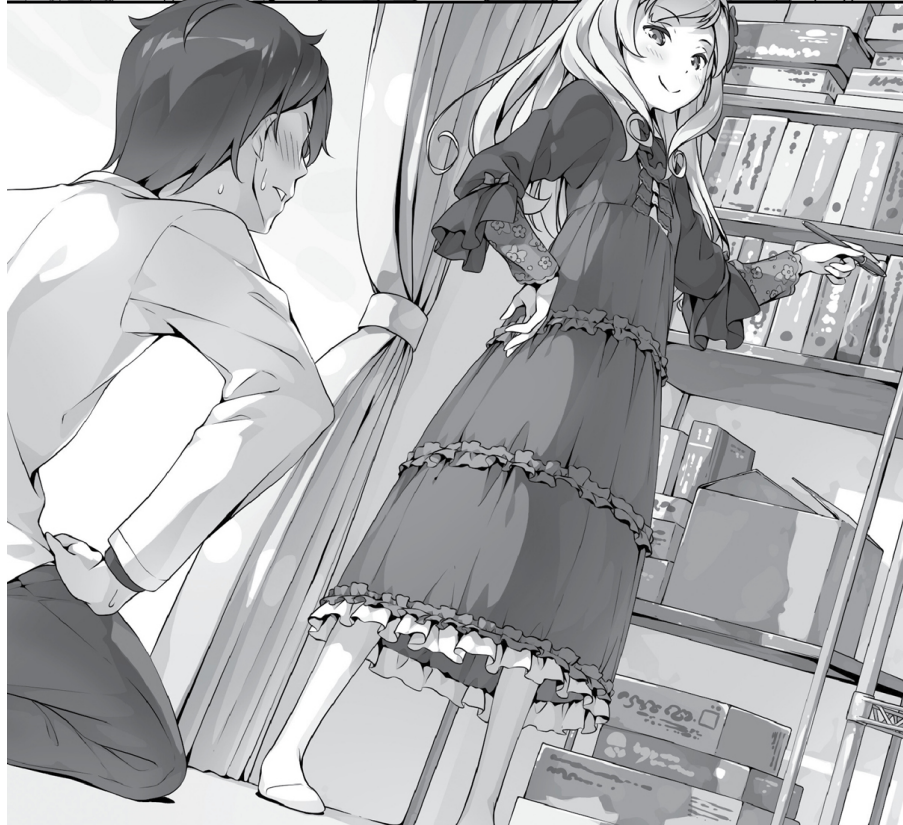
"Yeah. I think all of the smaller charges are gonna be those."

"Did you print out the receipts for these books?"

"Huh? No..."

"I imagine not, no... I doubt anyone would bring up expenses this small, but we might need receipts for them anyway, so prepare for that if need be."

"...All right."



“There’s a lot of charges to the iTunes Store, too, I see. Is this music?”

“Um, yeah. That kind of thing.”

Ashley gave Itsuki a sharp look for his sudden vagueness. “... You’re spending nearly ten thousand yen here, all told. Albums don’t cost that much, do they?”

“...There was music, and I maybe bought *just a few* Magic Stones, too,” Itsuki sheepishly admitted, turning his eyes aside.

“Magic Stones?”

“Yeah. You buy them so you can open loot boxes in mobile games.”

“Ah, yes...I believe several of the clients I’m advising have engaged in that.”

The term *mobile game* is a little difficult to define succinctly, so let’s just go with “games playable on smartphones.” Many of these games utilize simpler gameplay systems than their grown-up relatives that are played on consoles. A large number of them have a “loot box” or similar reward that, when opened, earns players a random chance at new cards, items, or characters. Loot boxes can often be purchased with in-game items (called “Magic Stones,” “Spirit Stones,” and other names, depending on the game), and charging real-life cash for these items is how many games make their money.

“What kind of games were you playing?”

“...*LS Legion*... It’s short for *Little Sister Legion*.”

“I think the title’s already told me everything I need to know about this game.”

“...You’re probably right.”

LS Legion was a mobile game that, as the name suggested, featured a large number of little-sister characters. Buying loot boxes let you obtain more sisters, some of whom were a lot rarer and more valuable than the others. The only way to obtain them was with a little luck and a lot of Magic Stone purchases. The gameplay was so simple, it barely qualified as a game. There was almost no real story to speak of—just a few lines of background and dialogue for each sister.

...Even Itsuki knew that *LS Legion* wasn’t exactly Game of the Year material. A lot of mobile games, like *Puzzle & Dragons* or *Chain Chronicle*, were starting to challenge console games in quality, and he fully knew playing them would be a far better use of his free time.

He knew it full well, and yet...

“...You’re plowing quite a bit of money into this game, aren’t you?”

“...Yeah. I mean, there’s no turning back now,” Itsuki offered, eyes glazing over as Ashley thumbed through the statements. When he

first started playing this game, he wound up spending the equivalent of several thousand dollars on loot boxes so he could obtain the little-sister characters he wanted. If he quit playing, that would all go to waste. So he kept going.

“...Do... Do you think those Magic Stones could count as business expenses, too? Maybe?” a hopeful Itsuki asked.

“Are you using the game in your own work?”

“...” Itsuki thought it over for a few seconds. “I can positively tell you,” he gravely droned, “that I haven’t at all. There’s no story, and all the sisters have are a few lines of dialogue and a couple sentences of backstory, so it’s not like I have any attachment to them. It... It’s just a big JPEG folder with the word *sister* attached to it...”

He raised a shaky fist into the air.

“Ah,” Ashley drily answered. “Well, start using it.”

“Well, yeah, but how...?”

“What’s your next book going to be about?”

“...? It’s Volume Five of *Sisterly Combat*,” a bewildered Itsuki replied.

“Ah.” Ashley thought for a moment. “The last volume ended with the hero surrounded by enemy forces, yes? At the end of their rope?”

“You read my stuff?!”

“I read everything my clients have released in the past year. I started with Volume Three, though, so I didn’t understand most of the little details,” Ashley listlessly reported. “But let’s talk about how we can make Magic Stones into business expenses. Your hero is facing desperate times. I want you to have him say in the next volume, ‘Heh! Guess we don’t have much of a chance. The odds of surviving this are about the same as getting a rare character out of a loot box in a mobile game...’”

“W-wait a second!” Itsuki begged. “The protagonist of *Sisterly Combat* is a coolheaded dark knight who threw away everything he had to fight in the Dark World and save his only sister!”

“Well, if he likes his sister, then even better. Let’s make it ‘The odds of surviving this are about the same as drawing a rare sister from an *LS Legion* loot box.’ Even more perfect.”

“That would mess up everything! I told you, he’s a coolheaded dark knight battling in the Dark World!”

“A coolheaded dark knight battling in the Dark World can play games on his phone, can’t he?”

“No! And if he’s making a mobile-game metaphor when he’s surrounded by foes and seconds away from death, what kind of demented loot-box addict would that even make him?!”

“Oh? I think it’d be nice, having that kind of unexpected side to your unflappable dark knight.”

“...I mean, yeah, it’s a pretty conventional tactic to take a cool, composed character and give him some kind of unexpected quirk to riff off of, but...hmm...”

They continued to debate the issue, to no avail.

“I can’t do it! I just can’t see any appeal to a protagonist who wastes tons of money on little-sister-themed mobile games!”

“All right, well, let’s not make it the protagonist, then. He has a nemesis in the story, too, yes? Whenever they fight, why not have him say ‘Pfft... The only things in the world that excite me this much are fighting you and playing cell phone games.’”

“Great, so you want me to destroy the main villain instead of the protagonist?! What kind of shallow life has this guy even been living?! And after four volumes of the hero struggling against him? He’s gonna look like such a wuss!”

“You’re being rather selfish, you know. If you’re going to be that way, then fine. Just find a way to shoehorn mobile-phone games into your story.”

“I can’t! And I know I forgot to mention this until now, but *Sisterly Combat*’s set in a fantasy world! Bringing up smartphones would ruin the entire setting instantly!”

“Well, what’s wrong with ruining it a little?”

“What’s *not* wrong with it?!”

“...Look, what’s more important to you: an intricately woven story world or saving money on your taxes?”

“The story world!”

“Ugh!” Ashley shrugged, dejected. “You writers, I swear...”

“Oh, now *I*’m the bad guy...”

“Well, so be it. I’ll make up some justification for the Magic Stones.”

“Why didn’t you just do that from the start?!” Itsuki shouted, practically at the top of his lungs.



The questions about his credit-card statements and receipts continued for a while, and Ashley took great pains to read out the title and content of all the porn videos Itsuki had purchased for download before finally taking her leave.

“...I’m exhausted,” he groaned before lying his head on the kotatsu. And he was. To him, it was even more grueling than filling out the tax return by himself. If possible, he wanted to do nothing else for the rest of the day.

I’m never gonna go to that tax accountant again, he swore in his

heart.

Then, three days later, Ashley sent an e-mail with an estimate of how much his tax refund would be. It made Itsuki jump out of his chair. The estimate was nearly three times the rebate he'd earned last year.

Now Itsuki understood what Haruto had meant. "She's incredibly talented, and you can totally rely on her." He was right, and Itsuki thought he knew what he was trying to hint at, too. She *was* talented and reliable, but Ashley Ono was also an unrepentant sadist.

...Unrepentant...but reliable. She read her clients' work and asked about the content of the games they bought, and—Itsuki was pretty sure—that wasn't just so she could watch other people stew in their own juices. Hopefully.

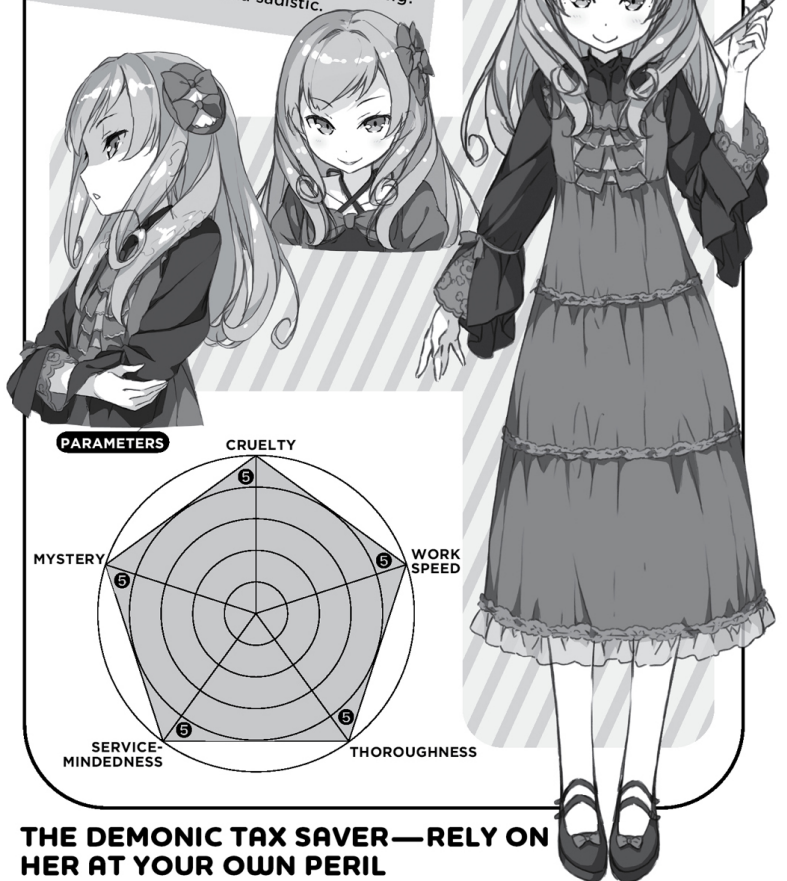
"...Ugh...!"

Talk to you next year!

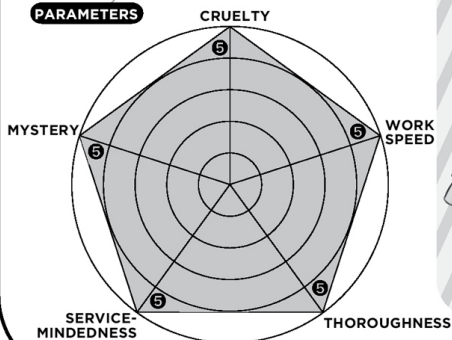
Having written that sentence at the end of his reply, Itsuki pressed the "Send" button. There were a lot of little-sister porn games and figures he could buy with that refund.

ASHLEY ONO

AGE: Unknown
A tax accountant known for providing solid results to people involved in publishing. Extremely talented—and sadistic.



PARAMETERS



THE DEMONIC TAX SAVER—RELY ON HER AT YOUR OWN PERIL

Chronica Chronicle (Part 1)

“...I wanna play a tabletop RPG.”

Such were the words that suddenly left Haruto’s mouth one night at Itsuki’s place as he sat at the kotatsu drinking beer and reading a volume in the *Clan Crest Replay* series.

“An RPG?” Itsuki asked from his work desk.

“Have you ever played one, Itsuki?”

“I know *about* them, but no, not really.”

The concept was familiar enough. Tabletop RPGs involved people talking to each other, throwing dice, and checking for this and that statistic as they proceeded through a story, no game system required. Players took the roles of adventurers, knights, kings, detectives, police officers, and more as they attempted to reach the end of a story scenario alive. The main flow was devised in advance by a person deemed the “gamemaster,” but depending on the players’ decisions, the story could proceed in unpredictable directions. Players literally crafted the story as they went (though it depended somewhat on the discretion of the gamemaster), so each RPG offered massive freedom and a true you-are-there feeling to the story.

“I was part of an RPG club in college, you know,” Haruto said, eyes fixed on some faraway point.

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Based on his prejudices, Itsuki would have guessed Haruto was in the tennis club or something.

“...I got into reading for fun back when I read replay books in middle school, so I always wanted to play one for myself. That was why I joined up the moment I was admitted.”

The “replay books” he mentioned were transcripts of RPG gameplay sessions put into book form for the entertainment of readers. These are a common sight in Japanese bookstores, often featuring anime-style illustrations similar to the ones in light novels. All the best ones feature three elements—talented gamemasters, talented players, and totally unpredictable dice rolls. The stories woven by the chemical reactions of all these uncertain elements often create drama that outclasses the most intricately devised of novels, so many readers enjoy reading replays as much as light novels, even if

they've never played an RPG in their life.

Haruto was currently in the middle of *Clan Crest Replay: Fantasia Factory*, a replay book that featured eight popular writers and illustrators playing in a single game. Given the creativity each one brought to their characters, the resulting story was remarkably exciting.

"So you went from gamemastering to writing, too, huh?" Itsuki asked. A gamemaster needed a lot of talents at their disposal—the technical skill to craft an interesting scenario, the ability to guide players in the desired direction smoothly and naturally, and the improvisational chops to handle unexpected developments. It was said that many authors currently working professionally in the field honed their storytelling skills as RPG gamemasters, and Itsuki figured Haruto must've been one of them.

"Nah...I left before the year was out, so..."

"...Is this gonna be a long story?"

Haruto's wry grin and snicker drove Itsuki to strongly suggest that he wasn't interested in hearing it.

"It's not, okay? Just hear me out. So I joined the club, and things were okay for about half a year. We'd have a session almost every week, and I GM'd a bunch of times. I even ignored my classes to build scenarios and original rules and stuff. It was incredibly fun. There were around ten people in the club, and I was the only freshman, but everyone else was really friendly to me. So there was one woman in the club, too. Really pretty and big breasted, too."

"I have to hear all of this?"

"All of it... So a lot of dudes in the club liked her, or I guess you could say nearly *all* the dudes in the club, but she never dated any of them. They all knew they were going after the same girl, and there was kind of this unwritten rule that nobody would just come out and say 'I love you—let's start dating' to her. 'Cause otherwise it'd make the club all awkward, you know? But then one day, not long after summer break ended—"

"You can stop. I know how this ends."

"—she told me she had feelings for me."

"See? I knew it!"

"...I turned her down. RPGs were more fun to me than messing around with girls, and I didn't want our relationship to ruin the thing we had going in the club. But when I told her no, she started asking out pretty much everybody else there, one after the other. Like, she'd date two or three of them at once, and it completely screwed things up between us. You could just feel the tension during our game sessions, and whoever she dumped would leave the club. By the time she finally quit, too, it was only me and the club president, but neither

of us wanted to keep the thing going. I still remember him telling me ‘That was all your fault’ the last time we met. It sucked.”

He refilled his glass and emptied it in a single gulp. Itsuki rewarded the story with a sleepy-eyed glare.

“...Okay, so now that you’ve told me the tale of yet another college club crashing and burning, what do you want from me now? You want me to call you Kodaka from *Haganai* from now on?”

“That’s too lofty an honor for the likes of me. At least Kodaka kept the Neighbors’ Club together through it all, unlike me. I just got reminded of all that, reading my first RPG replay in a while, so I kinda wanted to talk about it.”

“Talk about it, huh?”

Itsuki’s cheeks began to convulse as he pointed squarely at Haruto.

“Haruto, you’ve pissed me off for no good reason at all. For that, I hereby sentence you to being the GM for our game!”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been wanting to try one for a while now, too. If you’ve GM’d before, that’s all we need. Make this fun for me, okay?”

“Um, I’m kind of busy. They’re putting anime work on me, too!”

“I don’t care. If you got the time to drink in my workplace and tell stupid stories from your past, it can’t be that bad.”

“...Ughh... You got me there, I guess.” Haruto sighed and let out a short laugh. “Well, guess I’m doing it! Who’re you gonna invite?”

“How many people do we need for a session?”

“It’s easiest with four players, I suppose.”

“Okay. I know Kanikou’ll show up...and no way we’ll make contact with Setsuna, so... Can I invite some nonwriters?”

“Sure.”

“All right, I’ll try reaching out to Miyako and my brother.”

“Great. Have they ever played an RPG before?”

“I’ve never asked, but I’m sure they’re both beginners.”

“Fair enough. I’m sure Nayu is, too... Well, I think I’ll head home and come up with a scenario, then. I am so busy these days.”

Haruto sighed as he got up, the smile on his face more pure and childlike than the breezy grin he usually had on.



Later, on a Sunday in early March, Itsuki Hashima, Haruto Fuwa, Nayuta Kani, Miyako Shirakawa, and Chihiro Hashima were all

gathered at Itsuki's place. Haruto, as gamemaster, was seated window-side at the kotatsu, Chihiro faced him from the kitchen side, Miyako was to Chihiro's right, and on his left were Itsuki and Nayuta.

"...Are you sure I'm okay to play this, Bro?" Chihiro asked in a tiny voice.

Nayuta smiled. "Oh, there's no reason to be so nervous about it! I've always wanted to play a game with my future brother-in-law anyway."

"...Ah. I look forward to it," Chihiro bluntly replied.

"And not to jump the gun too much, but you can feel free to call me your sister right now, if you like."

"...I'll reserve that right for later, thanks."

"Hey, something got you down? Did you slap the salami this morning?"

"Slap the...? We don't have any salami in the house..."

"I mean, did you masturbate this morning?"

"Ma...?! N-no, of course not!"

Itsuki stared at the now cherry-red Chihiro.

"Could you stop sexually harassing my brother, please?"

"Oh, what's the big deal? He'll be *my* brother soon, too."

"No he won't!"

"No I won't!"

Chihiro and Itsuki had played games together in the past, but this was the first time Itsuki had brought some of his own friends into the fray. Chihiro had come to know Nayuta, Miyako, and Haruto through their encounters at his brother's apartment, but he usually left quickly afterward, so they never had any deep conversations. Miyako and Haruto, meanwhile, had never met before, but Itsuki didn't see that as a problem—the two of them and Chihiro had enough communication skills that they were bound to get along fine.

After they all exchanged a few more pleasantries, Haruto decided it was time to formally kick things off.

"Well," he began, "thank you all for coming today. We're going to be playing a game that I created using another game as a reference. Since you're all beginners, I tried to keep the gameplay system relatively simple, but I'll do my best to let you guys do whatever you feel like as it goes on, so don't be afraid to make any suggestions that come to mind."

"Kay."

"All righty!"

"Gotcha."

"Understood."

The party of four all nodded and gave their consent.

"...The game will be set in your basic sword-and-sorcery kind of

fantasy world. This world is composed of several continents, and in this game, we'll be focusing on one of them—the land of Chronica. The nations that call Chronica home have not engaged in any major wars with each other for the past several decades, and we'll begin this story on the western edge of the continent, in the kingdom of Gagagia.”

“Gagaga?”

“The kingdom of Gagagia,” Haruto said, correcting Itsuki. “...The territory comprising this kingdom contains a great deal of ruins and caverns. Many are the intrepid adventurers who venture into these forbidden zones. Perhaps they explore the ruins in search of treasure or plumb the depths of caves for monster teeth and claws to craft into weapons. Such are the kind of people who flock to the land of Gagaga—um, Gagagia, and your party of four is just one of many working in this realm. So let's start by creating your characters.”

“We make our own?” Miyako asked.

“Well, I've already worked out all the numerical stats and parameters for your characters, but I'd like you to use that as a base and customize them any way you want. The first character is a knight. Knights have very high offense and defense skills, and his job is to stand at the forefront and attack enemies or defend the party against them. The second is a thief; they're fast, nimble, and they use bows and knives in battle. They can also detect traps and unlock treasure chests and doors. Third is the monk, who's got magical healing and offensive skills; they're also second only to the knight in offense and defense, so they can fight up front, too. Lastly is the wizard, with powerful magical spells, some of which can strike multiple enemies at once.”

“Pretty well-balanced party,” Nayuta observed. “I like doing stuff like finishing the game with a party of four monks or four gadabouts.”

“Sure, yeah, it's fun to play with an off-kilter party like that, but let's try to keep it more standard this time around. Plus, with a video game, you can experiment with your party all you want if you build your EXP enough, but with a tabletop RPG, you only get one chance. Playing recklessly can get pretty risky.”

“So could we die while playing, maybe?” Miyako asked.

“Oh, if you're unlucky enough, sure,” Haruto replied with a grin. “And if you die... Well, I'll figure something out if it comes to it.”

“Hmm... I'll be the knight, then,” Itsuki interjected. “That's probably the least likely to die.”

“That's the only reason...?” Chihiro said, grinning.

“I think I'll take the wizard,” added Miyako.

“Which one do you want, Chihiro?” Nayuta asked. “I'll let my brother decide.”

“...I’m not your brother, so you go first.”

“All right. Your future big sister picks the monk.”

“...”

With everyone’s job settled, Haruto handed each player a character sheet.

These sheets contained a profile of your in-game persona, along with all the relevant stats. For this game, the skills and items each character already had in their possession were filled in. Things like name, age, gender, personal history, hobbies, likes, and dislikes were left blank.

“Okay, you guys can fill in the blanks to create your own character now.”

“We can choose our gender, too...?” Chihiro wondered.

“Sure. You could make your character close to yourself in real life, or you can play as someone completely different. Or you could pretend you’re just playing yourself, flung into this world by some freak occurrence.”

“...”

Chihiro peered intently at his character sheet, then gave Itsuki a quick glance. Itsuki was too busy jotting away at his sheet to notice.

“...What kind of character are you going with?”

“Her name’s Tsukiko, she’s seventeen years old, and she’s a beautiful swordswoman with long, flowing black hair.”

“You’re gender swapping?” Nayuta said, clearly excited.

“It’s not gender swapping! If a game lets me pick my sex, I always go with female.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, when you’re playing a game, you’re looking at your own character most of the time, so... I just think it’s more fun if you’re looking at a pretty girl instead of some dude.”

“Yeah,” Haruto said. “The equipment for women in *Monster Hunter* and *Toukiden* is a lot cuter, too.”

“I see... So you’re a female knight... I bet some tentacles or orc hordes would look great on top of you...,” Nayuta commented with a glance at Haruto.

“...Well, this is a fantasy world anyway, so I’m sure you’ll see monsters like that,” he offered.

“I look forward to it,” she replied with an evil grin.

“...If my brother’s playing a girl, maybe I should, too... Could I be Tsukiko’s little sister, maybe?”

“Little sister?!”

Itsuki always overreacted to that term. He gave Chihiro’s face a long, hard look. “You playing my sister... Well, um, fine by me, I guess.”

Nayuta's face soured at this ambivalence. "In *that* case, I'm gonna be his little sister, too! I'm ten years old! My hobby is having sex with my older sister! My main like is sex!"

"“““You can't have a ten-year-old do that!””” all three other players shouted in unison.

"...I can't?"

"...I mean, it's not that you can't, but... All right. Do whatever you want." Haruto rolled his eyes and threw in the towel.

"Hmm... If the other three party members are all sisters, I guess it'd be more natural if I joined the family, too." Miyako thought for a bit. "How about I be the oldest of them? I'll make her twenty, like my real age."

"Myaa the big sister, huh? Hee-hee-hee..." Nayuta giggled bashfully.

"Wait, so...if Miyako's the oldest one, does that mean...I'm your... little sister?!"

"Guess so."

"Wow... I'm a little sister..."

"Sounds like the perfect role for you, Itsuki."

"Well, hang on. I *like* little sisters, but that doesn't mean I necessarily want to *be* one."

"...I could lower my age a little, then," Miyako said. "I—I mean, I'd be happy to be your little sister, if you want..."

"Hmm..... Hmmm..... Hmmmmmmmm....."

The other players wondered whether Itsuki had ever thought harder about anything else in his life.

"...Well, let's just go with this."

"So it is possible... You can be a little sister, too..."

"Yep. I'm countin' on ya, Big Sis."

"You better not start bossing us around, Itsuki! You aren't the oldest, even..."

And so the party consisted of four sisters.

"Great. Now we'll distribute your bonus points. You can each put five extra points into any parameter you like."

"What are these '2d' and '3d' numbers next to the stats for strength and stuff?" Chihiro asked.

"The *d* stands for *dice*, and the number before it is how many dice you need to roll. So if it's 2d, that means you roll two dice."

"What difference does the number of dice make?"

"Well, for example, let's say you're attacked by someone. If the number for your enemy's accuracy is lower than the number for your evasion skill, you'll be able to dodge the attack, but you have to roll the dice first to see what number you get."

"So the more dice you get to roll, the better?"

“Pretty much, yeah. So basically you work with individual dice. Every time your base stat passes a multiple of six, you get one more die to roll. If your strength is six, you’ll get to roll two dice; if it’s twelve, you’ll get to roll three.”

“All right... So my Dexterity is eleven; does that mean I can roll three dice if I add one more point to it?”

“Right, right. You’ll be rolling dice to do all sorts of things, like gathering information, opening chests, and lots of other stuff besides battles, so your dice rolls are super important. If you can hit a multiple of six with one or two more points, it’s worth trying to raise that stat.”

Haruto gave them some time to ponder where to assign their bonus points before he continued. “Okay,” he then said, “finally, I’m gonna have each of you create a unique skill for yourself.”

“A unique skill?” Itsuki asked.

“Sure. It can be anything. You can give yourself a really powerful attack or the ability to transform into something or walk through walls or whatever. Just tell me what you’re picturing, and I’ll work it into the gameplay system. But if it’s too strong or helpful, I’ll attach some penalties to it or restrict when you’re allowed to use it, just to keep things balanced.”

“A powerful attack?” Miyako said. “I’ll go with a rail gun, then.”

Haruto scowled. “A rail gun?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard of that? It’s this skill from the novel *A Certain Magical Index* that’s used by Mikoto Misaka. It lets her fire off coins at high speed with electrical currents and stuff, and I like her a lot, so...”

“...Oh, I know it. Any light novel writer would.”

“Okay, I’ll go with that, then!” Miyako answered contentedly.

“Um, all right...,” Haruto nervously replied.

“...You sure?” Itsuki protested.

“...Ah, it oughta be all right. It’s not like we’re going to publish the transcript of this as a replay or anything.”

“Hey, that’s actually a good idea,” Chihiro suddenly said. Haruto turned toward him, expecting the worst.

“I wanna have the Imagine Breaker!”

“Whoa! Shameless!”

“It’s a skill the hero from *A Certain Magical Index* has. It lets him cancel out any supernatural skills with the touch of his right hand.”

“...Again, any light novel writer would know that.”

“That’s what I’ll go with, then,” he chirped.

“...Okay.” Haruto began to look visibly nervous.

“Ooh, the Imagine Breaker’s a nice idea,” Miyako said, oblivious to this.

“Yeah, I thought it’d be nice if I’m playing a thief with a lot of Agility.”

“And you’re actually thinking strategically about it, too...!” Haruto said, his voice a mix of admiration and deep misgivings.

Suddenly, Nayuta raised her hand. “I got it! I want an ability where I can boost Itsuki’s stats when I have sex with his character!”

“Sure, all right.”

“...I didn’t think you’d just agree to it like that.”

“Well, compared to risking a copyright-infringement lawsuit like these two guys, a little X-rated action is nothing...,” the resigned Haruto told the surprised Nayuta.

“Haruto,” Itsuki interjected, “I think I wanna get a little risky with mine, too.”

“...You’re the boss.”

“Great!” he said, a childlike twinkle in his eyes. “I call it Unlimited Blade Works!”

“You ‘call’ it?” Haruto said, hand to his head. “You dumbass.”

Once Haruto figured out how to work these unique skills into the game, he gave one final check of each completed character. For the sake of keeping things at least somewhat original, he made them change their custom skills’ names to something else.

Tsukiko Midfield

PLAYER Itsuki Hashima AGE 17 GENDER ♀

External characteristics

A fetching young woman with long black hair. Her left eye is blue while her right is a crimson red. She is clad in silvery armor that covers her chest, shoulders, and hips, but she otherwise keeps her equipment light, with her pale skin exposed around the midsection. Her upper arms and thighs are similarly unprotected.

Background

Second oldest in a group of four adventuring sisters. They were born into a prestigious noble family but left home after they grew exasperated with the constant power struggle between their family and surrounding vassals. They arrive in the kingdom of Gagagia as a band of adventurers.

Hobbies Googling herself

Likes

Little sisters, her fans, Belgian beer, shrimp, whale sharks, owls, deep-sea fish, grilled salmon, spring rolls, crab

Dislikes

Stupid pricks who think Amazon reviews give them total freedom of speech; the Itsuki Hashima thread on 2ch; aggregate sites and all the people they feed off; assholes who start bitching about "light novels these days" and the idiots who believe them; light novels with full nude scenes that aren't illustrated; unclear rankings that change the weight they give to websites, test readers, and contributors every time and never announce how they weigh the votes (along with the general public, who take these rankings like they're the word of God, and the brazen publishers who use them in their advertising)

Parameters

LV: 1 / Max HP: 27 / Max MP: 10 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 12 (3d)

Spirit: 8 (2d) / Magic: 7 (2d) / Agility: 10 (2d) / Dexterity: 8 (2d)

Luck: 9 (2d) / Wisdom: 9 (2d) / Charisma: 9 (2d) / Intuition: 10 (2d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 70 / Bludgeoning: 80 / Piercing: 80 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Flowing Slash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +8. 2d+5 cutting damage on a single target.

Horizontal Stab: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +7. 2d+5 piercing damage on a single target.

Shield Bash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +6. 1d+6 bludgeoning damage on a single target. Pushes target back 1 square.

Protect: Consumes 0 MP. Takes all damage dealt to a neighboring character.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Unique skill

Phantom Smith: Can copy any weapon she has seen at least once in the game and perform that weapon's intrinsic actions. The copied weapon disappears after the action is complete. Consumes MP depending on the weapon copied.

Inventory Potion × 2





Sen Midfield

PLAYER

Chihiro Hashima

AGE

16

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of girlish? She has a ribbon on.

Background

Second youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Cooking, sports

Likes

Cute things

Dislikes

Liars

Parameters

LV: 1 / Max HP: 17 / Max MP: 15 / Movement: 4 / Strength: 7 (2d)

Spirit: 7 (2d) / Magic: 6 (2d) / Agility: 15 (3d) / Dexterity: 13 (3d)

Luck: 12 (3d) / Wisdom: 9 (2d) / Charisma: 8 (2d) / Intuition: 12 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 80 / Leg Bind: 80

Actions

Arrow: Range 5. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +5. 1d+5 piercing damage on a single target.

Knife: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +10. 1d+7 cutting/piercing damage on a single target.

Unlock: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Opens the locks on doors and treasure chests.

Detect Trap: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Intuition +5. Discovers traps before they are set off.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Unique skill:

Jaldabaoth: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3. Cancels all magic touched by her hand, whether attack or healing types. Automatically destroys any magical items touched.

Inventory

Potion × 2

Miyako Midfield

PLAYER

Miyako
Shirakawa

AGE

20

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of like Mikoto Misaka

Background

Eldest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Shopping

Likes

People who try really hard

Dislikes

People who make fun of them for it

Parameters

LV: 1 / Max HP: 14 / Max MP: 30 / Movement: 2 / Strength: 5 (1d)

Spirit: 10 (2d) / Magic: 16 (3d) / Agility: 6 (2d) / Dexterity: 7 (2d)

Luck: 9 (2d) / Wisdom: 12 (3d) / Charisma: 10 (2d) / Intuition: 7 (2d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 80 / Cold: 80

Electrocution: 50 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 80 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Staff Strike: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. 1d bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Fireball: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+5 heat damage to enemies within range.

Ice Needle: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+10 cold/piercing damage to enemies within range.

Energy Bolt: Range 3. Consumes 4 MP. 3d+5 electrocution damage to enemies within range.

Unique skill

Thor's Bullet: Range 10. Consumes 15 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +10. 5d+25 piercing/bludgeoning/electrocution damage on a single target. Consumes 1 mithril piece.

Inventory

Potion x 2



Deathmask Midfield

PLAYER

Nayuta Kani

AGE

10

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Silver-haired Lolita type

Background

Youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Having sex with big sis Tsukiko

Likes

Sex

Dislikes

Those other guys

Parameters

LV: 1 / Max HP: 19 / Max MP: 20 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 10 (2d)

Spirit: 13 (3d) / Magic: 9 (2d) / Agility: 9 (2d) / Dexterity: 8 (2d)

Luck: 10 (2d) / Wisdom: 12 (3d) / Charisma: 11 (2d) / Intuition: 12 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 80 / Dark: 80

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 80 / Sleep: 80 / Confusion: 80 / Paralysis: 80 / Petrification: 80

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Mace: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3.
2d+3 bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Heal: Range 3. Consumes 2 MP. Automatically succeeds.
Heals 1d+5 HP on a single target.

Cure Poison: Range 2. Consumes 2 MP. Success defined as Spirit +5.
Eliminates poison effects on a single target.

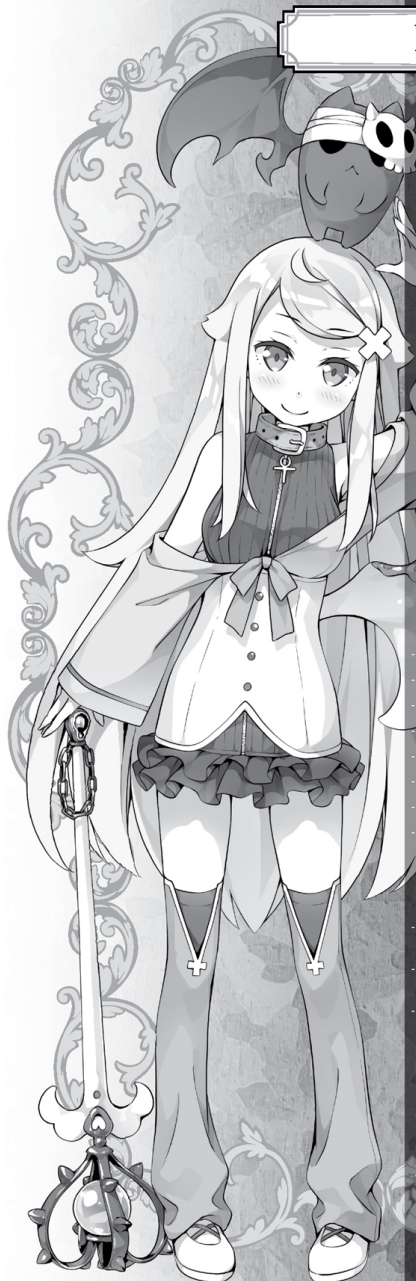
Holy Light: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+5 holy damage on a single target.

Unique skill:

Lilim's Kiss: Range 1. Consumes all MP and makes character skip the next turn. Automatically succeeds if target allows it; if not, accuracy defined as Dexterity +0. Strengthens the target via membrane-based contact. For the next 3 turns, all parameters on the target except HP, MP, and movement are boosted 1.3x and all resistances are doubled. Target can use 1 extra die while in effect.

Inventory

Potion × 2



With the player characters complete, Haruto, as gamemaster, played a piece of music (the opening theme from a certain well-known RPG) on his smartphone as he read out the prologue. Thus the tale of this adventuring sister quartet began.

Gamemaster (GM): Gagagia is a small kingdom located on the western edge of the land of Chronica. The four of you have just arrived at the town of Aegis, a three-day walk from Gagagia's royal capital. Your party consists of four women, all sisters, and all born to powerful nobility in a foreign nation. You have fled your own family, disgusted by the brazen power struggles of your family and their vassals, and now you've taken up new work as adventurers... Right, so let's start by having all of you introduce your characters.

Tsukiko (Itsuki): I am Tsukiko, second oldest of the four Midfield sisters, a beautiful fighter with long black hair. I stole this impressive sword and silver armor and shield from my family when I left them, and I have one blue eye and one red one. I'm protected in the chest, shoulder, and hip area by my armor, but otherwise my equipment is light. My pale skin is exposed in the stomach area, as well as in the upper arms and the thighs. My main hobby is doing web searches under my own name. My likes are little sisters, my fans, Belgian beer, shrimp, whale sharks, owls, deep-sea fish, grilled salmon, and spring rolls. My dislikes are stupid pricks who think Amazon reviews give them total freedom of speech; the Itsuki Hashima thread on 2ch; aggregate sites and all the people they feed off of; assholes who start bitching about "light novels these days" and the idiots who believe them; light novels with full nude scenes that aren't illustrated; unclear rankings that change the weight they give to websites, test readers, and contributors every time and never announce how they weigh the votes (along with the ignorant general public who take these rankings like they're the word of God and the brazen publishers who use them in their advertising). There's more to my backstory, but I ran out of writing space.

GM: Pretty long, dude! Also, your hobbies, likes, and dislikes are all pretty much your own, aren't they?

Tsukiko: Something wrong with that?

GM: No, but... I mean, it's important that you're comfortable with the role you're playing, I guess... Anyway, Miyako, you go next.

Miyako (Miyako): ...I didn't go into quite as much detail as Itsuki, but... Well, I'm the oldest sister, and I'm going by Miyako with this character, too. I guess I can cast offensive spells and stuff. I look pretty much like Mikoto from *A Certain Magical Index*.

Deathmask (Nayuta): Your character's aged twenty, right, Myaa?

Because I'm pretty sure Mikoto's supposed to be in middle school...

Miyako: Oh, um, I mean, it's just the inspiration for her, okay? No big deal.

Sen (Chihiro): Okay, I'll go next... My name's Sen, and I'm the third oldest. My job is a thief, and I look...I dunno, like a cute girl. Like, with a ribbon in my hair and everything. That's all.

Deathmask: And I am Deathmask, a monk and the youngest one of all. I've got silver hair and kind of a Lolita look, although my boobs are pretty big, too... Is it just us four sisters, by the way? We don't have any brothers or anything?

GM: You can decide on that for yourselves if you like. Pretty freaky name, by the way.

Miyako: Given that they named their last kid "Deathmask," I guess our parents might not have much affection for us.

Tsukiko: Maybe we had some more brothers, and the family only treated us girls as fodder for strategic weddings or something.

Miyako: Yeah, the...Midfield family, right? Good thing we ran away from 'em.

GM: Okay, with that settled, let's move on. Lemme switch the music to a town theme real quick... There. So the four of you made good your escape from your noble family, but it's been a long journey that brought you here, and you've already gone through all your traveling funds. In other words, you're broke. Not even enough money to stay at an inn for the night, much less continue your adventure. So what'll you guys do?

Deathmask: There's only one solution... We need something to take our minds off our plight. How about a quick lay to make us feel better, Itsu—I mean, Tsukiko?

Tsukiko: Shut up... Hey, stop clinging to my arm like that!

Sen: You sure live for the moment, huh, Deathmask? ...So what time is it now?

GM: Around the early afternoon.

Sen: Okay, so we've got time to make enough money to get a place for the night.

Deathmask: Ooh, smart thinking, Sen. Just what I'd expect from my big sis and future brother.

Miyako: How'll we find work?

GM: You'll find work notices inside the taverns and such. As adventurers, you've got the ability to find treasure in ruins and trade in things you find on defeated monsters for cash.

Sen: We'd probably have better luck taking a job from somebody for now.

Deathmask: I dunno. I'm the type of girl who just goes out there and keeps slashing away until we're all dead or we accomplish something.

GM: Well, doing that in an RPG like this could lead to permadeath, remember... Uh, but as you're all discussing plans with each other, you're approached by a group of four men who, judging by their looks, seem to be adventurers as well. It appears they've been drinking, and their gait is noticeably unsteady. "Geh-heh-heh! Hey, you girls are pretty cute. Wanna share a drink or two?"

Tsukiko: Hmm. I'm definitely a day drinker myself, so...

GM: "Geh-heh-heh! Glad to see we're cut from the same cloth. How 'bout it? Just a quick one at the tavern over there."

Tsukiko: We're kind of broke...but if this is kind of a medieval European setting, I bet they've got some local ale in the taverns. That'd be nice to try...

GM: "You're right! The ale around here is second to none, lady! You're gonna regret it if you don't get a snootful while you're here. And it's our treat, too, so don't you worry your pretty heads about that."

Tsukiko: Whoa, really?!

GM: "For you, babe, anything, geh-heh-heh..."

Tsukiko: Well, if we can drink on their dime, I don't see any reason to turn them down. Let's do it.

GM: "Hee-hee! Yeah, go ahead and drink all ya want!" Then another guy pipes up: "We're gonna give you the darkest ale we can find!"

Tsukiko: Ooh... Let's do it.

Sen: Whoa, wait a sec, Bro—I mean, Sis!

Miyako: You can't just follow them right in! They've obviously got some ulterior motive!

Tsukiko: Wh-what? Really?!

GM: I think it's fair to say these men have ideas of their own, yes. You really didn't notice...? Man, what an easy target...

Deathmask: Good thing Itsuki isn't really a girl. You almost got tricked into drinking Prince Manwhore's baby gravy! Which... wouldn't be so bad, actually...

Tsukiko: How dare you trick me with your nefarious words! It's time to punish you!

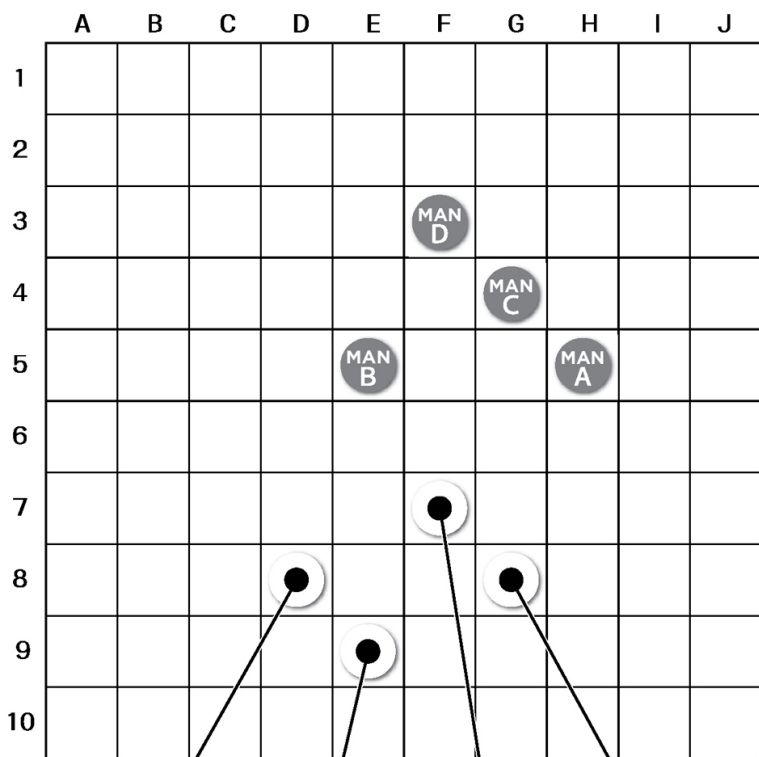
GM: I'm amazed how much you sound like a female warrior from a porn game... Um, the men flash vulgar smiles as they taunt you, saying things like "Ooh, you wanna go, little girl?"

Miyako: Of course we will! I wanna whip their asses!

Sen: I'm not sure we should be fighting needlessly right now...but I bet they'd have some money if we defeated them. They had to if they were gonna buy us drinks.

GM: Pretty hard-boiled thief there, sizing people up based on the valuables they're carrying. So, all right, shall we fight this band of drunken adventurers?

With all players nodding their agreement, Haruto switched his smartphone to a battle theme and took a sheet of paper and a set of person-shaped miniatures from his bag. Each figure was a fantasy character, wearing armor or robes and wielding swords and staffs, and Haruto positioned them atop the ten-by-ten grid printed on the paper.



SEN



MIYAKO



TSUKIKO



DEATHMASK

“This is Tsukiko,” he said, pointing at the armored knight (a brawny man). “This is Sen”—he placed a lightly armored young woman (with oddly heavyset looks) wielding a bowgun on the grid. “This is Miyako”—a magical-looking woman figure (with a chiseled face). “And this is Deathmask”—a rugged-looking man in a priest’s robe, mace held high in the air.

“Um, that’s a guy, isn’t it?”

“This priest is supposed to be a young girl...? He looks like Mozgus from *Berserk*.”

Haruto gave the complaining players a wry smile. “Hey, cut me a break. These are from a non-Japanese RPG series... So here are your enemies.”

Four miniatures, men holding swords and bows, were placed face-to-face with the party.

“We’ll be fighting on this ten-by-ten grid. Starting with the characters that have the highest Agility, each person will conduct a movement phase and an action phase. We’ll keep cycling through them all until one side wins. The action phase is where you use the actions written on your character sheets to attack or use items to heal yourselves, and the movement phase is where you move your character around to get in and out of range of the enemy. You can move as many squares as the number in your Movement stat, and you’re free to perform your action first before moving, like maybe punching someone and then running away from him.”

“Kind of like a strategy game,” Nayuta observed, “like *Fire Emblem* or *Tactics Ogre* or something.”

Haruto nodded. “Pretty much, yeah.”

GM: All right, so... The men begin to give you vulgar smiles as they ready their weapons. “Heh-heh-heh! It’s time to give you girls a dose of reality!” It sounds like they’re ready for combat, too. Man A and Man C here are wielding swords, B has a knife, and D has a bow in his hands.

Tsukiko: You’re going down, you dirty bastards!

GM: So the turn order begins with the guy who has the most Agility. That means we’ll start with Sen. Then it’ll go Tsukiko, Man B, Deathmask, Man A, Man C, Man D, and Miyako.

Sen: Oh? Okay, I’ll move a little bit and attack Man B with an Arrow, since he’s the most agile of them.

GM: The accuracy of your Arrow is determined by your Dexterity. Roll three dice for me.

Sen: Okay...  Fourteen.

GM: Then we apply the modifier for that skill. For Arrow, that’s plus

five for a total of nineteen. Let's see if Man B can evade that.

Haruto then propped up a piece of cardboard in front of him that was shaped like a rectangle but folded in at both edges. Like this: 

"What's that?" Miyako asked.

"This is called a gamemaster's screen," Haruto explained as he began rolling dice behind it. "I use this so I can hide the dice rolls I make for enemies from you, along with the other gamemaster data I have."

GM: 'Kay, Man B can't evade that, so that's a hit for Sen's Arrow... They're all drunk, by the way, so they got negative modifiers for their evasion and accuracy.

Deathmask: Wow, they're like sitting ducks.

GM: Now we'll calculate the Arrow's damage.

Sen: I roll one die for that, right? ...  Plus five, for nine.

GM: "Gah!" The man lets out a painful scream, but he's still on his feet and ready for action.

Deathmask: Do we know how much HP he has left?

GM: You can tell by looking at him how much the attack affected him or whether he's weakened or not, but the exact numbers are a secret.

Tsukiko: Oh, okay... I'm up next. I go up to Man B and attack with Flowing Slash. For accuracy, I roll...    Plus eight for twenty-one. Die, bastard!

GM: Oof, twenty-one... Yeah, that's a hit. Roll for damage.

Tsukiko: ...   Plus five for fourteen. Is he dead?!

GM: Sadly, not quite yet.

Deathmask: But that was such a perfect hit, too!

GM: Now it's Man B's turn. He slashes at Tsukiko, who's right in front of him. I'll roll for his accuracy, so... Tsukiko, you'll roll the dice to try to evade him.

Tsukiko:    ...Aw, c'mon!

GM: The man strikes Tsukiko, and he deals... Ooh, nice roll. But Tsukiko's got cutting resistance, so I multiply the damage by 0.7... Seven damage, total. Take seven off your HP on your character sheet for me.

Tsukiko: Ugh! I can't let this faze me...!

GM: After attacking, Man B flees in the opposite direction. That ends his turn, so Deathmask is up next.

Deathmask: Mmh, now I can't attack that guy. In that case, I'll plunge my hot Heal rays deep into my beloved Tsukiko from behind. Hee-hee... Just relax, Big Sis. I'll be gentle on you.

Tsukiko: You make it sound so pervy!

Deathmask: Just lie down, count the stains on the ceiling, and it'll be

over before you know it. Here goes... Oof! Fap, fap, fap...! ...Umm, that's a  plus five for nine points of healing.

Tsukiko: Ergh. I've healed up to max, but I feel like I've lost something along the way...

GM: Okay, now A, C, and D have their turns. Think you can hold out against them?

All three of them decided to attack Tsukiko.

"Gah! What are you lowlives doing?!"

Tsukiko managed to dodge Man A's slash but was unfortunate enough to fall victim to Man C's sword and Man D's arrow. Her resistances to cutting and piercing blunted the damage to some extent, but at the end of it, Itsuki had only half of his HP left.

GM: "Geh-heh-heh! If you wanna surrender, you better do it fast, lady!"

Tsukiko: Pfft! I'm not out of this yet! I can't go down in a place like this...

Deathmask: ...Ooh, this is usually when the noncon happens in porn games. Can't wait to see how this works out!

Miyako: So it's finally my turn. I wonder what spell I should use...

GM: The enemies are all gathered around Tsukiko, so you could damage all of them with a Fireball.

Miyako: All right, let's do that!

Ka-blam!

The Fireball Miyako unleashed exploded right where the three men stood, roasting them for major damage.

"Woo-hoo!"

"Well done, Big Sister!" Deathmask called.

"You're pretty good in a pinch," Tsukiko marveled. But the attack brought all the men to attention. Now they realized this wasn't a quartet of sisters they could take lightly.

"Oww... Now you've done it!"

"We're playin' for keeps now!"

GM: And now it's Sen's turn again. That round of attacking sobered up all the men, so there are no negative modifiers on them any longer.

Sen: I go up to my sister and use a Potion to heal her.

Tsukiko: I'll need it.

Sen: The potion heals 2d + 6 damage, so...

GM: But the moment you put your hand on the potion bottle, it shatters into a million pieces.

Sen: Huh?!

GM: Your Imagine—um, I mean, your “Jaldabaoth” skill cancels any magic that you touch, and a Potion is a magical elixir, so...there you go.

Sen: Just touching the bottle does that?

GM: ...Let’s just say these bottles need to have a magical treatment applied to them to keep the elixirs inside fresh.

Deathmask: Pretty cruel, Prince Manwhore...

GM: Well, that’s a really powerful skill, so it’s gotta have *some* disadvantage. You’re done moving and taking action, Sen, so we move on to Tsukiko’s turn.

Sen: Sorry, Sis...

Tsukiko: No worries. We’ll just wipe ’em out before they can do us in!

Tsukiko used Shield Bash to send Man A reeling backward—a damaging blow, but still not a lethal one. Man B behind her attempted to sidle up and slash her, but Tsukiko managed to block the attack with her shield.

“Well done, Sis!” Deathmask shouted as she cast another Heal spell, refilling most of Tsukiko’s HP.

Then Men A, C, and D advanced once more. Man A attempted to take out his frustrations on Tsukiko, only to have his strike deflected by her sword.

“Damn you! In that case, I’ll aim for the girl next to you with the lighter armor!”

Man C swung his sword at Sen, who was now standing next to Tsukiko—a heavy strike but a slow one. The agile Sen should’ve easily dodged it.

But...

GM: ...Ooh. I rolled a critical.

Sen: A critical?

GM: If I roll a natural  with at least two of my accuracy dice, that counts as a critical hit. That means it always hits, regardless of what you roll for evasion.

Sen: Whaa—?!

GM: At least it wasn’t a damage roll. If you get a crit on that, you earn a damage bonus based on your level.

Sen: ...



GM: So Man C lands a hit on Sen, for... Well, not to be the bearer of bad news, but that was for eleven damage. I'm rolling pretty good today... Sorry.

Sen: E-eleven...? My HP is seventeen, so...that leaves me with six...

Miyako: Another hit like that and you're gonna die, I bet...

GM: And following that... Showing the weakened Sen no mercy, Man D readies his bowgun. Roll for evasion with your Agility stat.

Sen: ...    for eight...! Hope that works...

GM: Ahh, sorry, but that's a hit.

Sen: No way...

GM: Now, Tsukiko.

Tsukiko: Hmm?

GM: You've got the Protect action, remember, which lets you take damage applied to someone on an adjacent square. What will you do?

Tsukiko: ...! I'm gonna Protect her, of course! I've got my little sister's back!

GM: Right. So Tsukiko covers Sen and takes four damage.

Tsukiko: Good. Nothing worth losing sleep over. You okay, Sen?

Sen: Um, thanks, Bro...

Tsukiko: Hey, it's any brother's job to protect his little sister... Oh, right, I'm a sister, too.

Miyako: Okay, my turn. I'll use a Potion to heal Chihiro.

Using the Potion fully healed Sen's HP.

On the next turn, Sen wheeled behind Itsuki and fired an Arrow at Man A.

"Graahhh!"

With a final roar, the man thudded to the ground.

"There's one, finally," Itsuki said as he healed himself with a Potion—only to have Man B damage him again in the next turn.

Deathmask: Hmm... We're just gonna get whittled down like this. I think our only option is to use some more-powerful magic to kill them all at once.

Miyako: Can we do that? I know I can attack multiple foes, but I don't know if I can kill them in one go.

Deathmask: Not with normal spells. But if we power them up, we can.

Miyako: Power them up?

Deathmask: My unique skill, Lilim's Kiss, could make you a lot stronger.

Miyako: Well, hang on! You aren't gonna power me up by doing something...gross, are you?

Deathmask: C'mon, Sis, it's the only way...!

Miyako: You can act as serious as you want, but you won't fool me! There's got to be something else we can do!

Deathmask: There's not. We have to screw to survive, Myaa.

Miyako: You're enjoying this, aren't you?!

Deathmask: Well, I made this unique skill and all. It'd be a shame if I didn't try it out.

Miyako: All right, I'm gonna use my rail gun! I'm bound to kill one of 'em with it, at least!

GM: Sadly, your rail gun—I mean, your Thor's Bullet skill—requires one mithril piece per shot.

Miyako: Mithril?

GM: Yes. These are coins made of mithril. They're extremely valuable, and you guys don't have any.

Miyako: Aw, man...

Deathmask: Sex is the only answer! Please, you need to accept the truth!

Miyako: N-no! I'm saving myself for my true love...!

Deathmask: Oh, don't give me that innocent act. What happened to the real Myaa, preying on the opposite sex left and right?

Miyako: Stop spreading lies about me! I thought you loved Itsuki anyway! You think he's okay with that?!

Deathmask: I'm not the purehearted maiden I usually am, who blushes at the sensation of a single finger upon my skin. I'm the red-hot licentious Loli Deathmask, who does it with anyone, hetero or not!

GM: ...Let me add that Lilim's Kiss works via mucus contact, so a kiss is just fine, really.

Deathmask: It... It is...?! Since when did that get written in...?!

GM: We've got children under eighteen in the room. I have to.

Deathmask: Ugh... Like you ever cared about that before, Prince Manwhore... Well, all right, Miyako. Pucker up.

Miyako: ...Well, a...a kiss ought to be all right...and I'm in the game world anyway, so we're not *really* doing it...

Deathmask: Good. So I go up to Myaa and cast Lilim's Kiss. She's agreed to it, so it automatically succeeds. Here we go! *Smooch*.

Miyako: Whoa! I said we didn't have to really do it!

Deathmask: Just kidding... The ten-year-old girl's waifish tongue penetrates the soft, pert lips of the twenty-year-old grown woman. Their tongues intertwine in the most obscene of ways, their spit freely exchanged with each other. Mfff... The others can hear loud smacking sounds, along with Miyako losing all control and panting out of the corners of her mouth. "Nnh... Ah, ahhh... ♥!"

Miyako: H-heh, don't cook up my reactions for me!

Deathmask: I say, "Hee-hee, you're so cute, Big Sis... ♥" as I indulge

myself with Miyako's tongue. Soon, I nimbly remove the tassel keeping her robe together. It silently slips off her and falls to the ground, exposing her young and supple skin to the world. She removes her lips from mine, a single string of spit connecting us. "Agh! No! Oh, I'm so embarrassed," she exclaims as her cheeks begin to redden. "We can't let ourselves do this," she says, attempting to push my small body away from her. But she's only putting a bare minimum of force into it. I snicker at her. "That's what your mouth might be saying," I say as I flash a devilish grin at her, "but you're anticipating this as much as I am, aren't you, Sister?" I extend a hand to Miyako's undergarments, nimbly using it to remove both her bra and her shorts. She is now stark naked, her shame and anticipation making her visibly shake. I give her a satisfied look as I remove my own garments, applying my lips to one of her nipples and playing with the edge of it with my tongue. "Ahhh!" Miyako gasps. "Hee-hee-hee! Are you feeling it?" I say, applying more force. "What a dirty big sister you are!" My fingers trace complex paths across Miyako's body in assorted places, making her wince and groan with each stop they make. In another moment, they reach inside the most sensitive place on her entire body. "You're melting in my hands, Sis," I say. "How blissfully deviant." Miyako is panting, in a state of pure ecstasy, slack-jawed as she begs me to go on. "Ooh, I can't take any more... ♡"

Miyako: I can't take any more of this!

Smack!

Miyako, face red as a tomato, gave Nayuta a slap to the head.

"...That hurt, Myaa," Nayuta blithely reported, her cheek a bit flushed.

"Nngh... I told you I only wanted a kiss..." Miyako moaned, tears in her eyes.

Nayuta gave an impish smile. "Well, it's your fault for having such a dirty mind... I wish someone could've stopped me. I'm terrible at figuring out how those sorts of things should end."

Chihiro had his head pointed at the floor, just as tomato-like as Miyako. Itsuki and Haruto were flushed as well, paying rapt attention to the proceedings.

"I'm amazed you can just whip out an erotic story like that from nothing, too..."

"Oh, any writer can do that," Nayuta deadpanned. "I didn't exactly make an effort on the prose, either."

"...Really?" Miyako asked, looking at Itsuki and Haruto.

"...If you're asking whether I can do that or not," Itsuki replied, "then yeah, I can."

Haruto snickered. "I wouldn't read it out loud to somebody else,

though.”

“...You writers are so weird,” Miyako said with a sigh, her frustration and awe both evident in it.



GM: Umm... So Deathmask's Lilim's Kiss is now in effect. Her MP's set to zero, and she can't move in the next turn. Miyako's resistances and stats got a major boost, but there's no need to calculate them.

Miyako: Oh?

GM: That's because after that salacious little scene between you and Deathmask, the men stopped fighting and started staring right at you. Now you hear the sharp sound of a whistle as a group of around ten men—they look like soldiers to you—make their way through the crowd of onlookers toward you. "We're the military police! Stop fighting at once—" Then they notice the stark-naked Miyako and Deathmask in each other's arms. It stuns them into silence for a moment, then one of them clears his throat. "...Ahem! I hereby place you two under arrest for public indecency!"

Miyako: What? No way!

Deathmask: Hang on. All I was doing was having a hot, steamy make-out session in the middle of the street with my sister.

GM: "We call that public indecency around here, little girl."

Deathmask: Yeah, I guess so, huh?

Miyako: I didn't do anything!

GM: The men you were fighting leave the scene in a hurry, shouting "Well, we're off" as they do. You're the only ones left.

Sen: Great... Should we run, too?

GM: The military police have already surrounded you. I wouldn't like your chances.

Tsukiko: So we'll have to fight our way out!

Sen: Um, do you think that's okay?

GM: You might be able to defeat the police in combat, but then you'll all be wanted by the kingdom, probably. What'll you do?

Tsukiko: Hmm...

Deathmask: I think we'll just have to let 'em take us away. We can explain ourselves later.

Miyako: What are you being so calm about? This is all *your* fault!

Deathmask: You should probably get your clothes back on first, Sis. I already have mine on.

Miyako: Huh?! That's not fair!

GM: "Just pipe down and come with us, girls..."

Tsukiko: Pfft! Whatever!

Deathmask: Come on, officers! We were just faking it anyway!

Tsukiko: ...?

GM: ...The MPs are too devoted to their duty to notice as they take

you away to a dungeon on the outskirts of town. Now all four of you are in a cell, stripped of your weapons. "You sex-starved animals can cool down here for the night," the guard says.

Miyako: I'm not a sex-starved animal! Aww... I never imagined I'd get arrested for public indecency sometime in my life...

GM: Well, you did cause quite a ruckus in the middle of town. That's what they arrested you for.

Miyako: There's a big difference between causing a ruckus and having sex in public!

Tsukiko: ...So now what, though? Are we gonna break out of here?

Deathmask: Myaa's been powered up by our sex, remember. I bet she could destroy the jail door with her magic, no problem!

Miyako: ...Could I? 'Cause otherwise, I'm totally a victim here...

Sen: They're gonna let us out tomorrow, it sounds like. Maybe we could just spend the night here?

GM: As the four of you talk over matters in the dungeon, you hear a voice say "Hello?" from outside your cell.

Tsukiko: Oh?

GM: The voice belongs to a blond-haired, blue-eyed little girl. She's in a dress that looks completely out of place in this jail.

Deathmask: Ah... Is she the chief warden, maybe? Like, a total sadist who looks all sweet and innocent but secretly likes to torture her prisoners?

Tsukiko: Gah! I refuse to submit to torture!

GM: "...I'm not the head warden, and I'd never do something as horrible as torture you. My name is Sylvia, and I am the Aegis town lord's daughter. I was hoping I could make a request of you all."

Tsukiko: ...Wait. Why are you asking a favor of a bunch of perverted women arrested for indecent exposure?

Miyako: I'm not perverted!

Deathmask: Not that I have room to talk, but is Sylvia blind or something?

GM: "I just... I like the look in your eyes, is all. You four women, traveling alone... You must be very gifted indeed."

Tsukiko: You're just seeing what you want to see, twisting things to suit you better. And you have no idea how ugly it makes you look, either... I hate people like you.

GM: "That's not a very nice thing to say to someone you've just met, now is it...? Could you at least tell me what brought you here?"

Sen: We might as well hear her out.

GM: "...Thank you. I suppose you're the easiest one here to deal with. So it's like this—"

Vrrrrm!

Just as Haruto was about to regale the party with Sylvia's story, the smartphone playing his RPG background music began to vibrate and play a ringtone.

"Oops! Sorry, that's from my editor. One sec."

Haruto leaped away from the table, walked into the kitchen, and pressed the "Accept" button. "Hi, this is Fuwa," he said softly.

"Hello. This is Kawabe from Editorial. Do you have a moment to talk?"

"I'm out at the moment, so...is it an emergency?"

"Oh, not really. I just wanted to confirm something with you. We asked you to submit an afterword for the first manga volume by yesterday, but have you sent that in yet? We haven't received it, so I thought maybe you were having some e-mail issues."

"Uh...! I—I'm sorry, I forgot all about it! I'll send it to you today!"

"Ah, all right. That ought to be fine, but...it's pretty uncommon for you to forget about work like that, Fuwa. Did something happen?"

"No, I, um... I was just focused on something else, so..."

"Oh?"

"But I'm gonna make this my top priority! I'm super sorry about this!"

Haruto trudged back to the kotatsu after the call ended. "...Sorry, guys, but there's this rush assignment I gotta do, so I'm gonna have to end the session."

"Aw, really? We were just getting into the meat of the story, too!"

"...I'm really sorry." Haruto lowered his head at the sight of the pouting Itsuki.

"...Well, all right. We'll pick this up later on."

"Sure," Miyako said.

"I look forward to it," Chihiro added.

"...You want to keep playing?" Haruto hesitantly asked. The four players instantly gave him a matching set of "what a stupid question" faces.

"I'm not exactly thrilled with the way Nayu treated me," Miyako observed, "but this game's pretty fun."

Chihiro, for his part, flashed a soft smile. "I didn't know there was a game like this before now. Thanks a lot, gamemaster!"

"I swear I'm gonna get intimate with Tsukiko next time."

"Like hell you are. I don't need your trashy magic spells."

"Hopefully you'll have the right sort of sexy situation cooked up for Itsuki next session, Prince Manwhore. Maybe something with orcs or tentacles or slimes."

Haruto laughed, although it sounded more than a bit like sobbing. Itsuki took the opportunity to whisper something to him, unnoticed.

"...Did that help wipe away some of that goofy trauma?"

“...I think so. Thanks, Itsuki.”



That night, at the Hashima residence, a twenty-minute bus ride from Itsuki's apartment, Chihiro Hashima soaked in the bathtub and reflected on the day's RPG session. *Man, that was a lot of fun*, he thought. *I never thought I'd get to play a game with all my brother's friends. Pretty interesting people, too, although I'm not really into that "future brother" stuff.*

Plus...

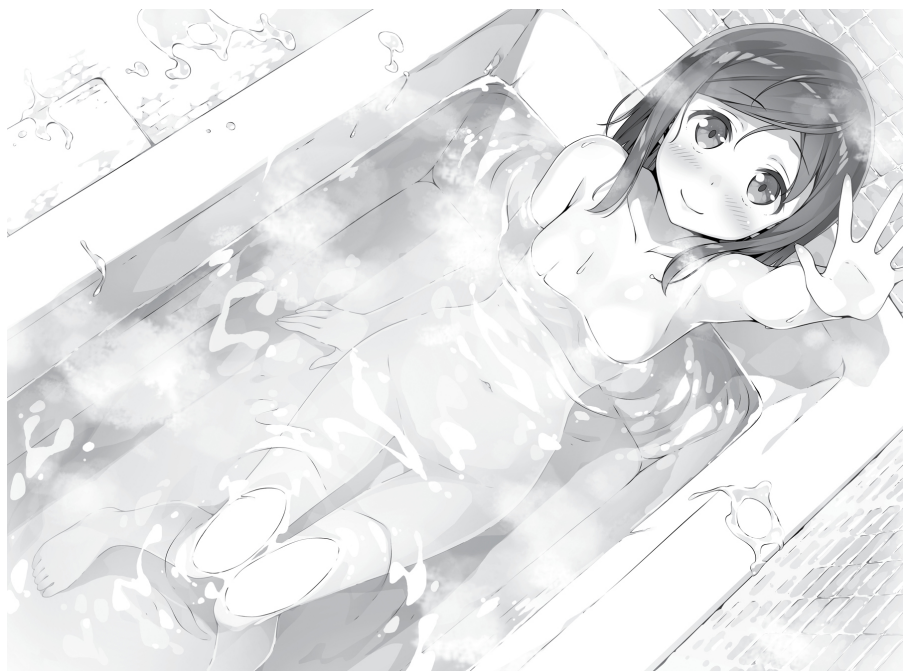
"I've got my little sister's back!"

"Hee-hee..."

Whenever he replayed Itsuki's in-game declaration in his mind, it always managed to both make him smile and send a pang of something or other racing across his chest.

Little sister, huh...?

He looked down at his own naked body. And while it was a little (okay, a lot) smaller than the average for people of this gender, the curvature to Chihiro's chest area was clearly feminine in nature.



Chihiro Hashima was a girl. And Itsuki, her brother, still didn't know.

A sister was all he needed—but he had none. How would the story change, though, the moment the truth turned Itsuki Hashima's world upside down?

It was impossible for anyone to say yet.

(The End)

CHIHIRO HASHIMA

AGE: 16

Itsuki's little brother (actually little sister),
the child of the woman his father married.



PARAMETERS

ACADEMIC
SKILLS

SECRETS

7

PHYSICAL
ABILITY

LIFE SKILLS

POPULARITY

**THE PERFECT HUMAN BEING WITH A
STAGGERING SECRET**

01

YUU SHIMIZU
(Bladedance of Elementalers, MF Bunko J)

Drinking good beer with friends while playing board games and RPGs, occasionally doing some work, too—I wish I had that kind of youth! But even in such a fun and ideal world, everyone's still got their own issues... The book takes a really delicate, gentle perspective on its characters. Also, wow, Hirasaka, you were playing all those games for research purposes, huh? What a surprise!

ASAURA

(Ben-To, Super Dash Bunko)

This book offers another chance to interact with the identity of Yami Hirasaka, the author. It's a real shining piece of work for both fans and anyone else interested in how an author lives their life... By the way, who do I have to pay off to get myself inserted into the story and paired with Nayuta, and how much?

02

03

YUUJI YUUJI
(Oreshura, GA Bunko)

The classic tale of a youthful band of light novel writers eating and drinking and playing games and traveling and eating and drinking and filing tax returns and trying out tabletop RPGs—and they're all physically attractive, too. So different from the world I know, it makes me want to cry. I hate it when authors actually live satisfying lives!



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OF HUGE PRAISE FROM
AN ARMY OF FRONT-
LINE CREATORS!**

* In no special order

04

SHIROW SHIRATORI
(No-Rin, GA Bunko)

Truly, this is the archetype of the arch-novelist! Heading off to Okinawa because he feels cold, jetting to Hokkaido for some fresh salmon eggs... Writing stories based on pure instinct! Entire plots being changed on a whim! And it's all fun, so who cares?!

SHUNSAKU YANO

(RPG designer: Double Cross, Grancrest, Fujimi Dragon Book)

The RPG replay section of this book is filled with the kinds of things I could never write in my own replays...! In a way, this book makes every RPG writer in the nation shudder. Read it, and maybe you, too, can figure out why light novel writers are such big fans of analog gaming...

05

06

SOU SAGARA
(The Hentai Prince and the Stony Cat, MF Bunko J)

Hirasaka is the kind of author who can throw a football straight at a batter during the high school championship and still make him swing at it for a strike. It's amazing. All the goofy crap he writes, and it's all incredibly enthralling! It's not fair! And the way he mixes reality with fantasy is so surreal—reading this book really lets you become Hirasaka in a way. Maybe. I felt that way, at least.

KEEJI MIZOGUCHI

(Illustrator, Seishun Buta Yarou wa Bunny Girl Senpai no Yume o Minai, Dengeki Bunko)

It's doggedly realistic, incredibly cute, and—more than anything—fun to read. As an illustrator, I've never seen a set of characters that let my wildest ideas run free. That's what makes it so frustrating that my friend Kantoku got the chance to design Nayuta. How is that even remotely fair? Argh!

07



OUGYO KAWAGISHI

(*Jinsei*, Gagaga Bunko)

—A sense of danger. That's the most concise way to describe the feeling I had when I heard that Yomi Hirasaka was going to write for the Gagaga Bunko imprint. The editor assigned to him said he felt the same thing, too—a sense of danger. Being able to write a com-

ment for this book based on that connection—and to read this book, for that matter... **You know, it's just as fun as I feared. That sense of danger just keeps expanding.** Like someone's actively inflating it.

I figured it'd wind up like this. This is Yomi Hirasaka we're talking about. Of course it's going to be fun.

It's just that, you know, I write the *Jinsei* series, but the last volume of that's going to come out in the same month as this volume! Being exposed to something as fun as this, at a time like this, is leading to some serious emotional damage! If my mental state were any weaker, I'd probably be poopsocking it in my room for several months in a row.

I suppose I should stop talking about myself and start talking about the book, but *A Sister's All You Need* is basically the story of a bunch of light novel writers. A work of fiction, of course, so the characters reflect the kitschy stereotypes you see in light novels themselves, but it's always got its finger firmly on the pulse of reality, too. To the point where I can hopefully be forgiven for philosophizing about writers. These characters and the realistic streak running under them all—I think that's really hard to pull off. You can define these characters perfectly by their traits, as if plucked straight out of a database, but they all worry over things, get envious, play around, fall in love, and file their taxes—as full-fledged light novel writers. The two elements couldn't be further apart from each other, but they're mixed up in the most natural of ways to form this piece of entertainment. Hence that budding sense of danger. If I could take this sense and stack it up high, I would guess that it'd approach the height of Mount Fuji.

Of course, my personal sense of danger means nothing to readers like yourself. So just go ahead and read it—read Yomi Hirasaka's latest work! Read it and take in all the fun that this master craftsman offers. Reading it, for me, made me forget all about my sense of danger, after all. No doubt about it.

I'd like to wrap up by quoting the line that made me laugh the most:

"Oh, crap! It's the editor! Run!"

* Note: We asked Kawagishi to write a comment around a hundred Japanese characters long, but he got the number wrong and wrote a thousand characters instead. We printed it all anyway.



WATARU WATARI

(My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected, Gagaga Bunko)

I'm wondering whether, perhaps, readers get an honest dose of reality when they read this. More is known about the mating habits of the okapi than a light novel writer's life, I imagine, so it may be hard for readers to

discern what's real and what isn't.

I imagine this goes without saying, but a light novel author's life isn't littered with beautiful women. The deadlines are even crueler, the editors are a little bit scarier, and there definitely aren't a bevy of hot ladies around me. Even if there were, it wouldn't lead to anything. I mean, seriously, come on. As far as careers go, light novel writer is about as garbage a one as you'll find.

It's a hardscrabble life, writing these things. Which is why many people might think there isn't a lot of reality to be found in this book. But there is. Tons of it.

I mean, right now, it'll be easy to find full-time writers hanging out in the afternoons and playing board games. For someone like me, who has a day job to juggle as well, I'm working at that time, and they never invite me anyway. The full-timers just kind of casually invite each other over, and they do go on trips, too. (Me, I'm working, and they never invite me anyway.)

The way that popular writers mostly hang out with each other is pretty realistic, too. I wish those bastards would actually work a little for a change. Also, maybe invite me over sometime? I'd probably turn it down, though.

Full-time and part-time writers lead very different lives. I feel as if I'm both as close as I could be to the subject matter and as far away as I could be as well. But thanks to that, I can say this: This is reality. The way you can't write a thing if it's just not working for you is reality, too.

The most realistic thing of all about it, though, is how **it depicts real creators and the raw feelings they all hold within themselves. You laugh while you read this, but then there are scenes that make your face harden for a moment. This is what makes Yomi so scary...** Plus, Miyako is totally cute, too.

I can't wait to see how this story develops going forward. I'm also beside myself trying to figure out which of the handsome, attractive authors in the story are modeled after Wataru Watari. Not all of them, I don't think.

...By the way, this has nothing to do with my statement on realism, but which red-light districts do you think the editor KenKen (a nickname I gave him) likes to visit during his off time?

* Note: We asked Wataru to write a comment around a hundred Japanese characters long, but... Seriously, doesn't anyone listen to us? And what's with that total nonsense at the end?

Afterword

In the manga *Space Brothers*, there's an episode where the protagonist is utterly amazed that he's able to discuss incredibly esoteric outer-space-related topics with the astronauts around him, even though none of his friends were interested in space when he tried talking about it as a kid. But when I go up to my writer friends and talk about novels, manga, anime, games, or other types of entertainment, I sometimes feel the same rush that this protagonist does. Discussing characters' insides, or what the author's trying to say through the work, or the shouts and murmurs in this or that sentence or scene, or how awesome the character setups for this-or-that description is, or whether a priest should "bless" something or "offer prayers," or whether the term should be *original concept* or *original story*, or whether it'd be better to use the term *crap* or *shit*. Or saying, "I think it'd be sillier if I used the term *purty li'l panties* in the novel that kicks off this story, but do you think that could work in terms of the vocabulary Itsuki would use?" Not to mention discussing whether nudes or clothed photos are sexier or saying "Here's this new servant I just thought up" or "What if *I* was summoned to another world to serve as its hero?" All this utter nonsense being tossed around by grown men and women. Nobody ever says anything like "It's only a light novel" or "It's only manga" or "Why are you getting so worked up over these works of fiction?" It can get so heated that it actually leads to fistfights, and even as I type this into the keyboard, there are bloodstains on my knuckles. Why don't they understand that nude wins every time, that it's only natural that a woman in her most natural of states would be sexiest of all?

It's often said that you shouldn't get a job doing the thing you love, lest you lose the ability to enjoy it. That makes sense to me. This job isn't easy, and it's not all fun and hilarity nonstop, and sometimes it becomes hard to enjoy a lighthearted comedy novel if you find out the author was coughing up blood throughout the writing process. But making this your job gives you access to new perspectives, and discussing these hardships with friends working from the same perspective is the most fun thing in the world. Whether it's novels or outer space, encountering something you truly love and being able to

work in it may have some bad elements, but I think it ultimately leads to happiness. The fact that I still have my head above water in this world, even after all the struggles I've had to face in this reality of mine, isn't just because I like light novels. It's in large part because I like the people I met in this world, people I could never have met otherwise.

Spending time with the screwy yet incredibly fascinating people who like getting all worked up about fiction—fully taking in the bravery, the justice, the love, the lust, the friendship, the dreams, the hopes, and the kindness within them—is bliss to me, and that's why I want to keep treating all this fiction seriously. That's what led to *A Sister's All You Need.*, a very personal, very absurd love letter that extends out to tens of thousands of words. It's a work of fiction, of course, and it really doesn't have anything to do with any real person or group, but in terms of my feelings, it's the unvarnished truth. If you enjoyed it at all, nothing could make me happier.

Finally, I would like to profusely thank my illustrator, Kantoku; my editor Iwaasa; everyone else involved with producing this book; everyone who provided comments for it; and most of all, the people who reached out for this book and the other ones I've written. Also, to everyone I've played with, drank with, and worked with—I'd be too embarrassed to say this anywhere else, but thanks for getting yourselves involved in my life. Let's keep it going.

L-O-V-E!

Yomi Hirasaka, Silver-Haired Nude Lolita Writer

* Note! Refrain from going extremely lowbrow or sexually harassing your fellow players during an RPG session. Game aggressively, but keep it fun and in moderation!

Afterword



Thank you very much for reading all the way to the end. This is Kantoku, the illustrator for this novel.

The chemical reactions that make up this tale, a mix of true-to-life writer situations and the kind of non-geeky developments that would never happen in reality, are a remarkable joy to read. I feel as if this is the kind of creative life I've been striving for all this time... Plus, I love sexual innuendo, so reading this was a total laugh for me.

Designing the characters for this book was quite a task. Chihiro in particular took a lot of doing. When I first saw the title, I hadn't drawn for any series that had little-sister characters in them. I thought to myself, *Hee-hee, I know exactly what kind of balance to strike*, but really, none of the characters here are as easy to understand as all of that. Thinking in terms of a standard template like that makes me cringe now!

Now that I'm done with Volume 1, though, I think I've finally got a decent image of the overall work. Talk to you soon!

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